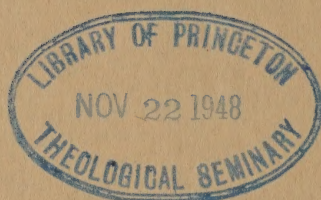
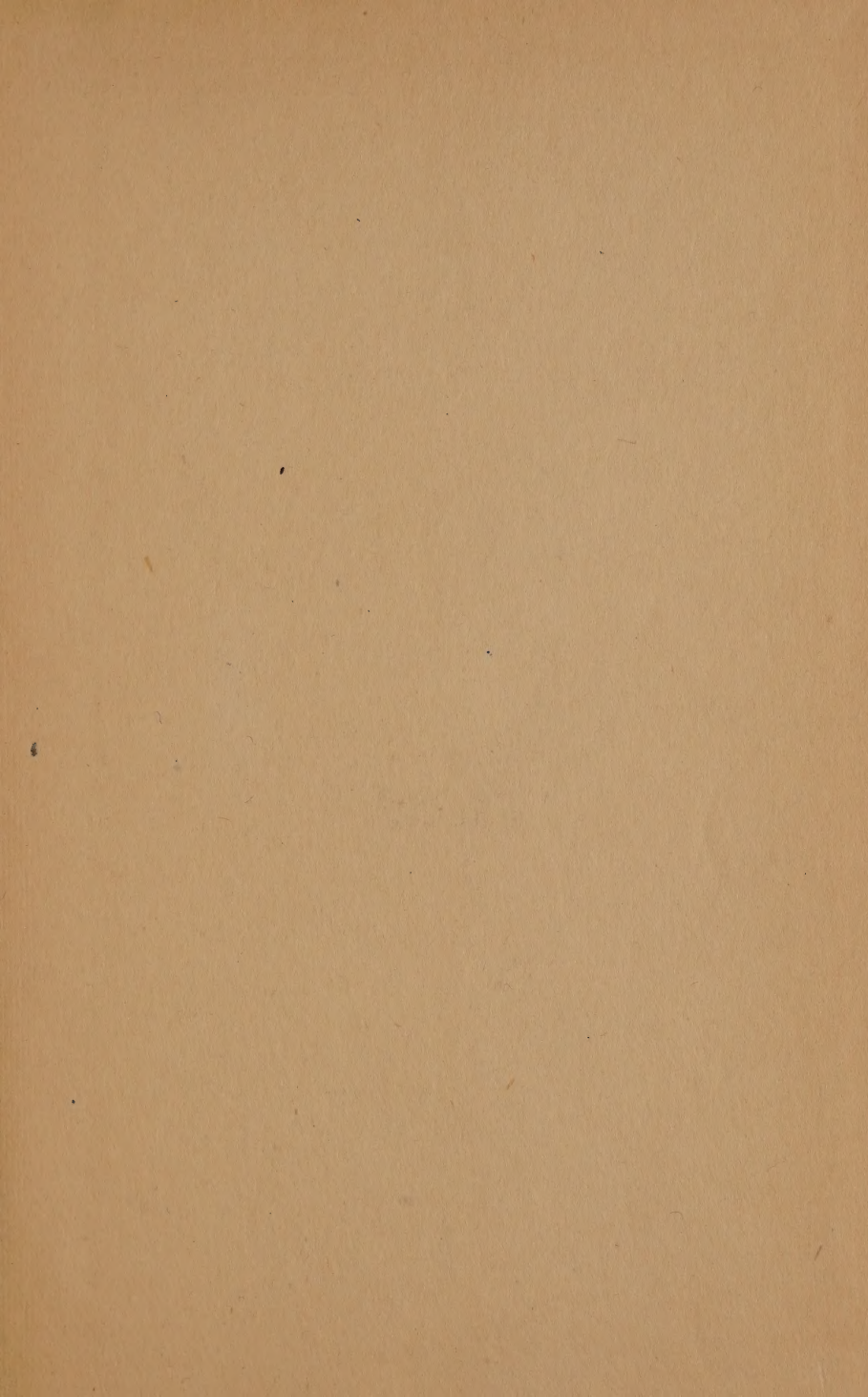


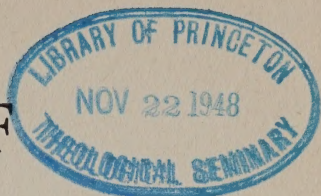
*Poets of
Christian
Thought*



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POETS OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT



Evaluations from Dante to T. S. Eliot

By

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IN THANKFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE
GRACIOUS INFLUENCE OF A LITTLE WHITE
CHURCH IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD.

PREFACE

The object of this book is twofold: first, to analyze and interpret in terms of their Christian thought the works of eight major poets: Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, Emerson, and T. S. Eliot; and, second, to trace the influence of this thought on the lives and writings of these outstanding literary men and, through them, on their modern readers.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, the author's goal is a synoptic approach to an area of study which already includes a variety of relatively complete works on the individual poets and the specific periods they represent. Nevertheless, in this important field of study there appears yet to be no work of a rather more comprehensive nature, such as is here undertaken, that would present to students and other serious readers a balanced view of developing Christian thought down the centuries as it is reflected in the writings of our major poets.

This book should prove of value in college courses devoted to the study of the Bible, of religion, and of English literature, as well as to persons interested in the particular field of the literature of Christian thought. It is hoped that, beyond its use in the college and the university, it may establish its worth to writers in the religious field, to the Christian minister, and to leaders of religious groups and classes in the churches or other similar community organizations. Finally, these chapters should prove themselves of definite and lasting worth to the layman who seeks thought-provoking and inspirational books for his library, books that will stand the test of reading and re-reading and yield a new harvest of truth and interpretation whenever the book is opened.

The reader will discover that the first and last chapters, those on Dante and T. S. Eliot, are closely related, ending on closely corresponding notes to form a complete octave. They, there-

fore, strike the keynote of the volume. Between them, in the progress of the scale, each of the other six chapters is duly accented to indicate the characteristic contribution of each writer. Differences, or dissonances, among them are not ignored. But the reader, it is believed, will be especially benefited by finding in the combined thought of the eight poets some familiar and harmonious strains.

If through these chapters poetry is enabled to cast some new light along the road of faith by which men are to find their way through the present age, and if, in addition, a ripening acquaintance with the great poets should result that would contribute some added or special pleasure on the journey, the author's aim will be achieved and his hope fully realized.

HENRY M. BATTENHOUSE

Albion, Michigan

June, 1947

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Poets of Christian Thought

INTRODUCTION

I

Poetry, as here considered, is of two kinds. It is either secular or sacred, treating of earthly or heavenly beauty, of human or divine goodness, of temporal or eternal truth. Each of these pursuits of the poet has its rightful place, appropriate to man's mundane or supramundane needs. Of all good poetry written out of a sincere desire to give pleasure and to instruct, we must gratefully say with John Dryden, as he once said while reading Chaucer: "Surely, here is God's plenty."

But if poetry is rather easy to classify, it is not so with the poet, who seems to remain hidden behind what he writes as often as he reveals himself through it. Like a weaver of some intricate piece of tapestry, he may perhaps please with the color and texture of his art, while his thoughts at their loom seem to remain unspoken. Yet it is definitely the poet's wish to communicate; and according to the very nature of his art what he says is related to the manner in which it is said. It is as true in art as in nature, Aristotle tells us, that the soul gives *form* to the body. The poetic gift is creative, and may even be prophetic. It is within the poet's power not only to create things of earthly beauty but, even more significantly, occasionally to uncover their reason for existence in an ultimate and divine cause. The world's genesis and its apocalypse, so to speak, are the poet's frontier.

Usually, when the poet speaks, it is in one of several familiar moods. At one moment his is the free spirit moving among things fixed and bound—upsetting, unearthing, and giving substance or being to things that never were before. At another moment he stands as the one firm object or landmark in a world of perpetual flux. At still another his mind seems to be transformed into a being of demonic passion and will, and it is

as if some kind of atomic power were given him to originate or destroy.

But, whatever we may say of his individual attitude or talent, the poet is not surprised at the distinction which Christian thought makes between things natural and supernatural. It is the poet's aim, when he writes seriously, to discriminate between the visible thing and the unseen power around and within it, and to find, if he can, the secret of the inter-relationship that exists there. The good poet is a master of correspondency. If he is of the type we call romantic, he will try, while passing through this world, to surprise it with his song, giving to the passing moment some exquisite charm and investing the secular with the mantle or magic of the divine. Or, if he is the kind of poet we know as classical, with a more serious intent, he will seek to bring the things of the transitory world about him into subjection to the pattern of his critical philosophical thought. Here, almost certainly, he will be aware of the tension between the forces of good and evil, and will seek to resolve this tension by a persistent reference to some established norm of reason or authoritative belief. To the poets of this present study the pattern of reference is the Christian faith.

II

When, late in the nineteenth century, William Morris wrote in the Prologue of *The Earthly Paradise*,

Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,

he expressed one view of life. He wished to give a heightened meaning to our present earthly existence, and to write worthy poetry about it before he died. The assumption of his verses is that human life is a fragile thing, like a butterfly's wing, easily broken against death's ivory gate which to the poet is also the gate of dreams. Similarly, centuries before, Chaucer wrote wisely as a man of this world, saying that it was useless for "the crock to strive against the wall"; and what Chaucer and Morris infer concerning us as earthly creatures—or earthen vessels—is undeniably true.

But when, by contrast, we reflect with T. S. Eliot (in the poem *Ash-Wednesday*) on man's weakness, we see the poet taking another view. Looking on the soul of man, weakened through sin but undergoing purgation from sin, he sees the dream take on reality and hope rising out of pain. He writes:

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices . . .

And the weak spirit quickens . . .

Quickens to recover . . .

And the blind eye creates

The empty forms between the ivory gates.¹

The conflict between these two views of life is forcibly expressed in the following contrasting lines in Eliot's poem: first, "The dream-crossed twilight between birth and dying"; then, second, "The time of tension between dying and birth." According to the one, the inference is that poetry, like the life it describes, is a winged dream, luminous in the twilight by which we grope our way on earth; according to the other, poetry is a Lucina who presides over the birthpangs of the soul, and has a priestly function. The *dream* poet presupposes that we long for sleep; the *priestly* poet, that we long for birth. By this classification, all poetry may be regarded either as offering a brief respite from engulfing night, or as an opening of the morning gates of life. (It is of more than passing interest here to note that the ancient Greeks, mindful of this fact, made a distinction between the Apollonian art of depicting life in tranquil order, and the Dionysian art of representing the world in the act of a new becoming.)

Christian poetry, or perhaps more accurately, the Christian use of poetry, implies this regenerative function. It deals with the ideas and truths that issue from the matrix of a Christian civilization and insure the growth and maturation of a Christian culture. Poetry, become thus Christian, stands within the ivory gates, removing the veil from the mystery of pain, from the power of sin and from the grim visage of death, and looks beyond death to the rebirth of man and of the world. The Chris-

¹ From *Collected Poems 1909-1935* by T. S. Eliot. Copyright 1934, 1936, by Harcourt, Brace & Co., Inc., New York.

tian poet, standing at the door of divine thought at the moment of becoming, is aptly represented in the early dawn of English history by the picture which the Venerable Bede gives to us of the poet Caedmon who, declaring himself unable to sing, obeyed the vision which said, "Sing to me of the Creation"; after which, Bede tells us, "he began at once to sing in praise of God the Creator verses and words which he had never heard before"; and so well chosen were the words, so fresh from sleep did they come to the poet that, Bede adds, "they cannot be translated into any other language without losing their intrinsic loftiness and beauty."

III

Dante, centuries ago, recognized in poetry the actual parable of life. The truth of a piece of writing, he declared, was latent in its symbolism, in that element which could be put to figurative use. All else was regarded as only the literal chronicle of events. Some books of the Old Testament, for example, were simply history until men read them on the higher level of their Christian interpretation. Thus, concerning the verses in Psalm CXIV,

When Israel went out of Egypt,
The house of Jacob
From a people of strange language;
Judah was his sanctuary,
And Israel his dominion.

Dante said: "If we look to the letter alone, the departure of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses is indicated to us; if to the allegory, our redemption accomplished by Christ is indicated to us; if to the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the woe and misery of sin to a state of grace is indicated to us; if to the anagogical sense, the departure of the consecrated soul from the slavery of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory is indicated. And though these mystic senses may be called by various names, they can all generally be spoken of as allegorical, since they are diverse from the literal or historical." ²

² Translation by A. H. Gilbert, *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, p. 202.

It is this allegorical nature of poetry that gives a peculiar significance to the *Divine Comedy*. But it is worthy of further note that the same manner of writing characterizes the *Vita Nuova*. Though usually regarded as a love poem, in this work the poet, after creating his characters after the pattern of this transitory world, lets all their perishable parts drop from them in order to give us a realistic picture both of this earthly life and of those truths which are considered by him to be imperishable.

Similarly, Shakespeare accomplishes this result in *Measure for Measure*, a story of natural passion set against Gospel truth. In it history and allegory seem as far apart as they are in the biblical *Song of Solomon*. Yet, for all its literal closeness to the story of man's earthly nature, *Measure for Measure* is a theological play whose title is itself based on one of our Lord's sayings in the Sermon on the Mount as recorded both by St. Luke and St. Matthew. Like the books of Daniel and Revelation, the play is an example of the author's way of hiding the word of truth within the literal story where, like the seed within the colorful flower, it may lie disguised and treasured until its time is come. It is as if the poet knew that if a man's life were to be seen in its entire span in one moment—with its detailed events, so to speak, compressed into one ignited flash of consciousness—there would be little or no need of history, but only of that exalted word of insight by which we unfailingly recognize poetry.

Poets like Dante and Shakespeare, wishing to make us actually aware of this fact, use the literary forms of the narrative and the drama in much the same manner that a painter uses dimension and color on a canvas, in order to exhibit, in one moment, an enduring truth. We may picture these poets perhaps more easily as writing in a kind of invisible ink the truths they wish men ultimately to read, and after that waiting for the day when the disguising sheet of parchment will be washed clean of what appears on the surface.

To succeed in such writing is a sign of genius. It presupposes what the poet Milton authoritatively called divine inspiration. Milton believed that the poet at his best wrote better

than he knew; and with this verdict Wordsworth was in full agreement. We commonly call Wordsworth a poet of nature, and such he was. But the most significant thing about him was his essentially religious mind. At his best he was an inspired poet, original and fresh, yet sagely calm and wise. One detects in his work the traces of man's entire spiritual history, the record, not merely of man's deeds, but of his soul. Tennyson and Browning further illustrate the irresistible tendency of good poetry to be religious; and Emerson's New England sagacity, as everyone who reads him can feel, was saturated in saintliness and poetry. Finally, as we have said, in T. S. Eliot poetry finds its true basis and ultimate justification in the Christian faith.

The Christian use of poetry is at last conditioned on a Christian conception of life and society. If we conclude, with such a contemporary historian of ideas as Jacques Maritain, that the Christian faith with its implicit way of life is destined ultimately to rule the minds of men, it follows with equal certainty that the kind of poetry which serves this end will receive the increasing attention of thoughtful persons everywhere. In relation to our present study, it means that poets like those treated in this volume will be found to have an ever larger epic significance as their work is seen to represent not simply our literary heritage but also our Christian tradition. It is out of this assurance that the chapters that follow have been written.

Chapter 1

DANTE

The writer stood, one day, in Florence looking at Ghiberti's bronze doors of the Baptistery, his fingers fretting, waiting to touch the enduring, shining figures of the Old Testament heroes impanelled there. Then, calling out the name of Dante, a vendor appeared, and he bought, for the price of five lire, a little bronze bust of the poet.

Often, of late, the bronze features of the poet, so deep and delicately cut, have suggested a strange, grave picture to him. It has been the picture of Dante walking across Europe, a stern, sad man, descending into *Inferno* by the crater of a lately erupting World War. To us today who read him, there is a singular greatness in his coming back again out of the *Inferno's* pit, bringing our lost hope with him. And as we read resolutely onward, through the *Purgatorio* and into the *Paradiso*, we begin to see this hope, so long still and cold in us, ignite and ascend in a warm flame of faith. God, we say, lives above this world's disaster, and Dante has let us look for a few ineffable moments into His divine face.

The *Divine Comedy* is a triumph of theological thought. It is a poem of abysmal shadows and of celestial vistas. Viewed in detail, it is the record of the poet's experiences in three worlds which, taken together, comprise man's intelligible universe. The first is the entire world of agony and of hopelessness, called Hell. The second is the vast upward striving world of souls, represented as Purgatory. The third is the realm of joy ineffable, of blessed peace, reaching to eternity, to the Empyrean, the abode of Heaven. All that is imaginatively and religiously possible to man is here encompassed; and all this is cast into the framework of a man's journey. As we follow Dante, we are moved first to tenderness and pity, then to hope,

and, at last, to a serene and exalted state of mind in which we repeat with the poet: "In His will is our peace."

I

The themes of the thirty-three cantos in the *Inferno* are varied and many. But they revolve, conveniently for our study, about the nine circles of Hell in which, by degrees, the doom of evildoers is described. The first of these nine concentric circles is called Limbo. It is the abode of those who have lived virtuously, but without a spiritual rebirth into the kingdom of God. Of them Virgil, Dante's guide, says:

Inquirest thou not what spirits
Are these which thou beholdest? Ere thou pass
Farther, I would thou know, that these of sin
Were blameless; and if aught they merited,
It profits not, since baptism was not theirs,
The portal to thy faith. If they before
The Gospel lived, they served not God aright;
And among such am I. For these defects,
And for no other evil, we are lost;
Only so far afflicted, that we live
Desiring without hope.¹

(Cary)

The second circle is the dreary abode of carnal sinners, who are forever restless, driven in the darkness by furious winds. The poet looks on the tragic scene with pity:

I understood, that to this torment sad
The carnal sinners are condemned, in whom
Reason by lust is swayed. As in large troops
And multitudinous, when winter reigns,
The starlings on their wings are borne abroad;
So bears the tyrannous gust those evil souls.

¹ Quotations from Dante's *Divine Comedy* have been taken from translations by H. F. Cary, J. A. Carlyle, Thomas Okey, and Philip H. Wicksteed. The translations by Cary are reprinted by permission of Crown Publishers, New York (1934); those by Carlyle, Okey, and Wicksteed, by permission of Temple Classics and E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York (1933).

On this side and on that, above, below,
It drives them. . . . As cranes,
Chanting their dolorous notes, traverse the sky,
Stretch'd out in long array; so I beheld
Spirits, who came loud wailing, hurried on
By their dire doom.

(*Cary*)

Cleopatra is there, and Helen of Troy; and, sadder still, Francesca, whom Dante personally remembers, and who has paid dearly, for a forbidden love. Out of deep pity for her—in contrast to every hard judgment of her—Dante hears her story, and, “heartstruck through sore compassion,” falls fainting to the ground.

Lower down, and in an intenser state of suffering, in the third circle of Hell, are the intemperate and the gluttonous. Theirs is a torment that sends a chill to the heart of the poet. For here, in this third circle, it rains forever:

. . . cold, and heavy rain; . . .

Large hail, and turbid water, and snow, pour down through the darksome air; the ground, on which it falls, emits a putrid smell.

Cerberus, a monster fierce and strange, with three throats, barks dog-like over those that are immersed in it, immersed in ice and mire. . . .

The rain makes them howl like dogs; with one side they screen the other; they often turn themselves, the impious wretches.

(*Carlyle*)

The descent into the fourth circle is into a deeper gloom. Here is the gate to Pluto's realm; and here dwell the avaricious and the prodigal. The greedy and the wasteful suffer alike in this dismal concavity which seems, as the poet looks into it, “to shut up all the evil of the universe.” For a strange thing happens here, as the wheel of fortune turns, robbing the greedy, and casting the burden of plenty on the prodigal. There is a divine justice in all this travail, suggesting a picture to the poet's mind:

As does the surge, there above Charybdis, that breaks itself against the surge wherewith it meets: so have the people here to counter-dance.

Here saw I too many more than elsewhere, both on the one side and on the other, with loud howlings, rolling weights by force of their chests;

they smote against each other, and then each wheeled round just there, rolling aback, shouting, "Why holdest thou?" and "Why throwest thou away?"

(*Carlyle*)

Till now, the sights confronting Dante on his journey have moved him to pity. But what he is now to see fills him with terror. He is in the fifth circle of Hell. The very air is malignant, giving forth evil like a vapor from the marshy river Styx. The people themselves have evil faces. They are naked and covered with mud, and they are striking at one another, with hands and feet, with head and chest, and tearing at one another with the teeth. They are the wrathful and sullen souls of lost men whom anger still torments, though without hope of any gain thereby or of any release therefrom. We well understand the futile waste of anger, and we feel its bad hot breath on us, as we read:

. . . "Son, now see the souls of those whom anger overcame:

. . . people underneath the water, who sob, and make it bubble at the surface; . . .

Fixed in the slime, they say: 'Sullen were we in the sweet air, that is gladdened by the Sun, carrying lazy smoke within our hearts;

now lie we sullen here in the black mire.'

(*Carlyle*)

The sixth circle is that reserved for heretics who, in the thought of Dante, are not heroes, as we might suppose when we now hear the word used, but misleading teachers of false doctrine. As blasphemy is more deadly than gluttony, so the heretic who leads men astray saying: "I have the truth, follow me," is more disastrously allied with evil. Dante calls such heretics outcasts of Heaven. They occupy an evil city, called

Dis, in the *Inferno*. Hellish furies surround its wall. Impetuous winds beat upon the rocky crag on which it is built. But worst of all are the sepulchers of that city. There, amid intense flames, from their uncovered tombs is heard the moan of remorse of the archheretics who led the innocent astray. As one turns from reading this passage of the *Inferno* and considers the present, one may well wonder what use the poet Dante, were he here, might make of a world so lately aflame with tyranny and heresy and falling bombs.

In the seventh circle, put there by violence, are the violent. Having shed blood, they now welter in a vast river of it, tormented, and tormenting one another. As they try to escape from the boiling bloody stream, they are driven back by galloping Centaurs who hunt them down with sharp, swift javelins. In the river's broad valley is the pathetic "forest of self-slayers," a bewildering bleak region of broken trees, toward which the poet, following his guide, is led:

Then I stretched my hand a little forward, and plucked a branchlet from a great thorn; and the trunk of it cried: "Why dost thou rend me?"

And when it had grown dark with blood, it again began to cry: "Why dost thou tear me? hast thou no breath of pity?"

Men we were, and now are turned to trees: truly thy hand should be more merciful, had we been souls of serpents."

As a green brand, that is burning at one end, at the other drops, and hisses with the wind which is escaping:

so from the broken splint, words and blood came forth together: whereat I . . . stood like one who is sore afraid.

(*Carlyle*)

When Dante reaches the eighth circle of *Inferno*, he seems to stop as if overwhelmed by the multitude of evildoers, all of them of one brood, so many that no mere circle can encompass them. To this evil brood he gives the general name of *Perpetrators of Fraud*, and assigns them to ten gulfs in which there is a separate and just torment for each: the seducer, the flatterer, the simonist, the barterer, the hypocrite, the robber, the blasphemer, the evil counselor, the scandal-monger and the

imposter. It is a grim recompense that these evildoers here receive for their lifelong evil deeds. In allotting to them the punishment that is due them, the poet sighs full often, standing stark and terrified and bewildered as he exclaims: "Power of God! O how severe Thou art, and how just!"

Dante and Virgil come, at last, to the ninth circle. It is encompassed by giants, and in it, fast imprisoned and fettered in ice, are the world's traitors. They are those who have lived by foul treachery and betrayed innocent men. In the fourth and innermost round of this ninth circle, and wholly covered with ice, are those whom evil turned treacherously against their best friends. In their very midst the poet sees Lucifer, or Satan. The *Inferno*, now in its last Canto, ends with these words:

How icy chill and hoarse I then became, ask not, O Reader!
for I write it not, because all speech would fail to tell. . . .

"Hold thee fast!" . . . said my guide, panting like a man
forspent, . . .

I raised my eyes to see Lucifer . . . and I saw him with the
legs turned upwards; . . .

"Rise up!" said the Master, "upon thy feet: the way back
to the bright world is long, and the road back toward the stars
is hard."

(*Carlyle*)

II

Men who have lived know that there is a state of existence which is halfway between Hell and Heaven. The terror is gone, the awful agony; yet an air of deep melancholy surrounds the soul. The weight is there; but the pain is lessened. The spirit slowly awakens; it revives. It breathes again. It is a time of renunciation, and of waiting. This is Purgatory. Dante depicts it as an issuing from a tomb, a slow walking into the pure air.

Purgatory, by welcome contrast, is a natural place. It is situated on earth; it is, in fact, the ancient Garden of Eden set aside as the abode of repentant souls. Not far away, upward and directly opposite to *Inferno*, is the earthly mound of Paradise, from which, by degrees and through revolving spheres,

the soul, once purified, ascends by divine knowledge to the complete vision and pure joy of Heaven. Purgatory, then, is the soul's turning point between Hell and Heaven. It is also the destined turning point of nations: the gateway to lasting world peace is at the far end of the broad Purgatorial plain of penitence and humiliation. Blessed, says Dante, is the people that finds its way to that bright gate.

The journey through Purgatory does not long detain the reader. It is an upward rising journey, by slow ascent, through the gently melancholy air; and, through thirty cantos of the way, Virgil is the poet's guide. Then, at a moment when Dante stands immovable and engrossed in wonder, Virgil leaves him, and Beatrice appears. It is a great moment for the poet. He has wandered amid pale spirits and shadows, amid prayers of contrition; and often stood still before troops of spirits climbing narrow paths to higher landings; and sometimes looked, all of a sudden, on a flowery valley, angel-guarded, where good men who had too long deferred repentance while on earth and had died a sudden death now walked and prayed; and looked again and beheld men whom he himself had known in Florence and Ravenna, once men of pride and worldly fame, now deeply penitent. He has seen, on the third level of Purgatory, the sin of anger expiated in patience; on the fourth, men purged from the sin of gloominess by radiant prayer; on the fifth, such illustrious examples of purification from the sin of greed that the mountain of Purgatory is shaken by a song of all the spirits singing "*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*"

All this the poet has witnessed. He records how pensive it has made him, and how wise. At the seventh level or circle of Purgatory he has stood, amid the singing of "*Come, ye blessed of my Father,*" at the entrance to the terrestrial Paradise. This is the symbol of wisdom without guile. Dante is now free. Philosophy, symbolized in Virgil, has led him as far as it can go. From this point in the journey he must follow a new guide. That guide is Revelation; and it is symbolized in Beatrice. The coming of Beatrice is accompanied by a triumphal procession, allegorical of the Christian Church. The scene is overwhelming to Dante. It is as if the saints at the last

trump were rising "each from his tomb, with full, clear voice singing Halleluiah." At the sight of Beatrice, he says:

Confusion and fear, together mingled, drove forth from my mouth a "Yea" such that to understand it the eyes were needed.

As a cross-bow breaks, when shot at too great tension, both its string and bow, . . .

so burst I under this heavy charge, pouring forth a torrent of tears and sighs.

(Okey)

The journey through Purgatory ends with these significant words:

If, reader, I had greater space for writing, I would sing, at least in part, of the sweet draught which never would have sated me. . . .

I came back from the most holy waves, *born again*, even as new trees renewed with new foliage, pure and ready to mount to the stars.

(Okey)

III

The *Paradiso* is dedicated to men of spiritual vision. It is great poetry, and peculiarly Christian. There is about it an atmosphere so exalting, a reasoning so pure and comprehensive, that it fulfills what we expect of poetry when we give to it the name divine. The poem resembles the great Empyrean, in which the highest theology and the noblest art unite to form one orb of transcendent light.

Heaven, to Dante, is not the symbol of a cult of ecstasy. It is the divine revelation of perfect knowledge concerning the nature and the destiny of the world. It involves man's redemption, his divine sonship, his desire toward perfection, and his eternal life. Above all, it exemplifies the divine purpose forever at work in the world, a purpose called Providence, whose activity extends through all creation. Of this original and purposive activity of the mind of God, the poet says in the first Canto:

All natures lean,
In this their order, diversely; some more,
Some less approaching to their primal source.
Thus they to different havens are moved on
Through the vast sea of being, . . .
Nor only creatures, void of intellect,
Are aim'd at by the bow; but even those,
That have intelligence and love, are pierced.
That Providence, who so well orders all,
With her own light makes ever calm the heaven,
In which the substance, that hath greatest speed,
Is turned: and thither now, as to our seat
Predestined, we are carried by the force
Of that strong cord, that never looses dart
But at fair aim and glad.

(*Cary*)

The journey toward Paradise is through seven heavens, and beyond them, to the Empyrean, the empire of celestial quiet. It is an ascending journey, symbolizing the soul's rise to a perfect knowledge of God. The first of these lesser heavens is that encircling the moon, where the mind is freed of all doubts concerning the absolute will of God actively at work in the world. This is the first orbit in which the mind must move toward an understanding of the meaning of life.

The second step is symbolized in Mercury. Here Dante's doubts are cleared away concerning the doctrine of redemption. In the third heaven, symbolized in Venus, the relation of earthly love to heavenly bliss is explained, when the poet, recovering from his earthly surprise, finds that the soul of Rachel the harlot is there. The fourth heaven is that of the sun. Here a wraith of blessed spirits, twelve in number, encompasses the poet. One of these spirits, and the most blessed, is Saint Thomas Aquinas. Dante reveres him greatly. Saint Francis, too, is there; and, with him, Saint Dominic. The conversation is of heavenly things and of those wonders in them that earthly creatures desire to see. It is as if the earthly were now altogether caught up in the heavenly, and divine knowledge, as represented in Saint Thomas, were completely joined with

earthly love, the poet's love for Beatrice. It is a holy moment in Dante's life when he writes :

And lo! around, of luster equable, upsprings a shining beyond what was there, . . .

And . . . new things-to-see begin to show in heaven, . . .

I there began to perceive new-come existences making a circle out beyond the other two circumferences.

Oh very sparkling of the Holy Breath! how sudden and how glowing it became before my eyes!

(*Wicksteed*)

In the fifth heaven, Dante's vision is graphically displayed in the form of a cross in whose light strong men of God are standing, in order, fighting for the true faith, and singing as they fight. It is the Holy Cross for which these men are battling, in simple uncorrupted faith. War to them is not evil, except as the cause is evil. Their trust is in their cause, and it is for God that they stake their claims. Hope is not dead in them. It lives as a flame that will, at last, and then wondrously, kindle the world with heavenly fire. Here Dante remembers the ancient biblical Joshua, and he wonders at the military career which was his. His lot was to fight for his faith, in his own day; and that, also, was the lot of Charlemagne whose destiny it was to live *in* war, but *for* peace. Dante's view here is not darkened by any earthly misconceptions. Beatrice bids him look intently, and with his mind's eye, and, as he does, he sees these brave spirits of times past before him, all luminous and ranged in order in the sign of the Sacred Cross. And he hears a hymn so sweetly tuned to harmony that, as he says :

And so was I enamoured there, that up till then there had been naught that me had bound with so sweet chains.

Perchance my saying may appear too bold, as slighting . . . those fair eyes, gazing into which my longing hath repose.

(*Wicksteed*)

The sixth heaven is peopled by the spirits of those who administered justice on earth. These were not only themselves just men; they were dispensers of justice, men of moral insight

and positive good will, leaders, sharers in the sovereignty of the planet Jupiter in whose orbit they now gloriously move. Dante likens them to the eagle's eye, symbol of that penetrating divine justice which is at one and the same time vigilant, fierce, brilliant as the sun, and pure as the heavens. "O sweet star," says the poet, "what quality and magnitude of gems made plain to me that our justice is the effect of the heaven thou dost engem!"

In the twenty-first Canto of the *Paradiso* the poet reaches the seventh heaven. He is now in the orbit of Saturn. Here is the eternal abode of those who passed their lives in holy retirement and gave themselves to saintly contemplation. Saint Benedict is there, and a multitude of others, a wondrous company of them, in a blessed state of existence beyond the other planets. In this high circle of heaven, the music of the spheres melts into sweet silence. The eighth is the heaven of the fixed stars. It is in the constellation of the Twins. The poet sees the seven spheres revolving and bathing in the luminous ether. The time of the last apocalypse has come; the consummation of history is at hand. The heavens grow more and more brilliant, and shine, all white, as if illumined by myriads of lamps which as one lamp constitute the Church of God. Then Christ Himself, the Living Light, appears. To the poet, so completely entranced, Beatrice, representing divine or theological knowledge, unfolds the vision's meaning in these words: "Therein is the wisdom and the might which oped the pathways betwixt heaven and earth."

It is in the ninth heaven that the poet is given a vision of the Divine Essence. He is now in the crystalline sphere, encircled, as in a halo, by a hierarchy of angels, and he hears "Hosanna sung to that fixed point which holdeth and shall ever hold them to the *Where*, in which they have been ever." This celestial Center, which is itself unmoved and still, but which causes all to move, this Empyrean Paradise:

This heaven hath no other *Where* than the divine mind
wherein is kindled the love which rolleth it and the power
which it sheddeth.

Light and love grasp it in one circle, as doth it the others,
and this engirdlement He only who doth gird it understandeth.
(*Wicksteed*)

Dante has here reached the poet's utmost height of reason and imagination. Ecstasy encircles him, his pen is dipped in light and fire, and the words he writes distil themselves in heavenly essence through his mind, as he no longer composes them, but now only hears the voice of theological knowledge:

Forth from the last corporeal are we come
Into the heaven, that is unbodied light;
Light intellectual, replete with love,
Love of true happiness, replete with joy;
Joy that transcends all sweetness of delight.
(*Cary*)

Nothing remains, now, to complete the poem but the supreme vision of God; and this vision comes to the poet in the form of the Holy Trinity. It is fitting that the symbolism of poetry and of theology should unite to express a man's conception of this the highest doctrine of the Christian faith, and that the poem should end on the high note of a hymn:

O virgin mother, daughter of thy Son! . . .
Here kneeleth one,
Who of all spirits hath reviewed the state,
From the world's lowest gap unto this height.
Suppliant to thee he kneels, imploring grace
For virtue yet more high, to lift his reason
Toward the bliss supreme. . . .
O eternal beam! . . .
Yield me again some little particle
Of what thou then appearedst; give my tongue
Power, but to leave one sparkle of thy glory
Upon the race to come, . . .
O grace, unenvying of thy boon! that gavest
Boldness to fix so earnestly my reason
On the everlasting splendor, that I look'd
While sight was unconsumed; and, in that depth,
Saw in one volume clasp'd of love, whate'er

The universe unfolds ; all properties
Of substance and of accident, beheld,
Compounded, yet one individual light
The whole. And of such bond methinks I saw
The Universal form ; . . .

O eternal light !

Sole in thyself that dwell'st ; and of thyself
Sole understood, past, present, or to come ;
Thou smiledst, on that circling, . . .

(Cary)

by which the poet meant the mystery of the Incarnation. But the intricacy of the vision was too deep for the poet, and his power of high fantasy failed him. He was content. The will of God had been fulfilled in him "by the Love that moves the sun in heaven and all the stars."

IV

The *Divine Comedy* represents an almost perfect union of theology and poetry. The story throbs with life ; and its poetry is the pulse beat of the living facts. It is, therefore, not enough to treat the poem as if it were, solely, either artistic or theological. It is both. Poetry and theology are equally its parents. The poem is their human-divine offspring.

This dual parentage of the poem is not always clearly understood. The esthetic critic, thinking in literary terms, has praised the poet's apt use of the metaphor ; the philosophical critic, thinking metaphysically, has lauded the Dantean soul. Their criticisms, therefore, have been understandably antagonistic. The rationalists have been offended by Dante's style ; the romantics have been unreflectively enamored of it. So, for example, Voltaire, sitting in judgment on the *Divine Comedy*, called it a fantastic poem. To use his own words, it was *sal-migondis*—a mixed dish, as Webster defines its English derivative, as of chopped meats and pickled herring steeped in oil and onions. In the same century, Horace Walpole called Dante "extravagant, absurd, disgusting ; in short, a Methodist in Bedlam."

Of the theological pattern of Dante's thought and of the doctrinal content of the poem, our literary critics until lately have had only a vague idea.

In poetry the task is to translate truth into experience. There is always the barrier of outward sense through which language must thrust itself, must break to reach us. The poet Browning speaks of it as the power to "pierce the screen 'twixt thing and word." This power, at last, marks the distinction between prose and poetry. Applied to Dante, it is the gulf that divides earth and paradise.

The problem of poetry, at this point, is the problem of theology: it is the task of making known, through the symbolism of speech, those realities which belong specifically to the category of the divine consciousness in man, and to give to these realities a central place in man's daily life. This task, we must see as we read the *Divine Comedy*, is not merely one of integration, of crossing and recrossing a bridge connecting the divine and the daily life, like the task of maintaining a free traffic between two cities situated by a river. Neither theology nor poetry passes so easily into man's natural mind. Listen to any demagogue haranguing a mob, and see how he will avoid them both. There is a kind of contradictoriness between poetry and the public mind, and, similarly, between theology and the thought of the man of the street. Outwardly it appears to be a matter of tone and taste: theology and poetry, it is said, are too aristocratic for the masses. Fundamentally, the poet knows, it is the difference between art and nature; and it involves the higher discipline of the natural passions. Art is a discipline that directs the mind to move creatively through certain truths to discover their reality behind a veil of symbolism. Theology requires a similar discipline; only its end, or aim, is the discovery of divine reality and eternal truth.

If the end of poetry, as someone has lately said, is to communicate, the *Divine Comedy* is a superb poem. It gets its message through to us, articulately and authoritatively. But communication presupposes mastery, a subjection of the material, not a submission to it. Dante wrestles like a strong man meeting an adversary. His lines are like well drawn muscles.

Their beauty is in their active strength against the tyranny of the natural passions and the dark powers of the world. To imagine Dante at work, for example on the *Purgatory*, is like seeing some giant, like Samson, struggling in chains, moving in the twilight, questioning, but knowing that God is with him, and breaking through, at last, to the victorious vision. There is no need now, in this vast reach of the poet's genius, to talk of dogma, or of style. These have served their ordained end.

Has anyone you know lived vigilantly and long enough to observe the growth of an oak tree through twenty seasons? This writer knew such a man who owned a sawmill on the bank of a little river running into the Susquehanna. He knew the constituent grain of the trees there, and the mighty energy that was liquid in them in the early summer. The water in the oak, he said, was its mightiest part. It drove the branches upward, the bark outward, the roots downward. It stilled the singing of the saw and warped the board in the sun. The mill owner sold the large wood for lumber, the sawdust for packing ice, the slabs for firewood. But this mightiest part that made the tree he did not sell. The sun caught it up, and the river bore it down to the roots of young trees. It was the immortal part of the oak in the cycle of its growth and actual being.

It is so with such a poem as the *Divine Comedy*. Dante did not manufacture it—though much literary and philosophical furniture has been manufactured from it. It is, in last analysis, a work of inspiration and vision. Shape it and use it as we will, the soul and mind of the poem are not touched by that use. The poem's thought, like the oak's living water, is derived from a hidden and divine Source.

Reading the pages of the poem's closing cantos is like hearing a Beethoven symphony through to its last strain. One takes a parting look at the poem: Beatrice rises, benign and expectant, her face all gracious and aflame with heaven's joy; Mary appears as "the Rose in which the Divine Word is made flesh"; the apostles bloom, white as lilies, sweet in the odor of their good words; Saint Peter is there, holding in his hands "the keys of glory"; the music of the spheres, circling, seals itself in a melody

around the name of Christ; faith, hope, and charity linger as heavenly graces encloistered in opalescence as in a cathedral window; the voices of Alpha and Omega are heard in a heavenly echo beyond time, where they blend into the words, "Come, ye blessed," from the lips of Christ; a most sweet song echoes through the heavens, and the words are "Holy, Holy, Holy"; at last, the Holy Virgin smiles on Dante, the vision subsides, distilling its beatitude of grace through him, as softly as "the snow is unsealed by the sun," as gently as the light leaves are loosed from the touch of the night wind.

V

We cannot take our leave of Dante without noting his reference to the temporal order. He was, after all, a citizen of Florence, a lawyer's son of a Guelf family who interested himself so actively in politics that the city banished him and he was forced to wander about in Italy, homeless, until he settled in Ravenna, where he died. And we are not forgetting that he wrote, beside the *Divine Comedy*, a philosophical work of an Aristotelian character known as the *Convito*, or Feast, and a political tract called *De Monarchia*, on the vital question of the pope and the prince, or the relation of the temporal to the supernatural authority.

It would hardly have been possible for Dante to be silent on the question of church and state; and he was not. He was a citizen and a Christian. He read Aristotle, and was a follower of Thomas Aquinas. It was by good logic, therefore, that he was led to say that, as God is one, so mankind, in order to be godlike, should be one family; and to affirm that, for the task of supplying this family's temporal needs, God has ordained the state, and the governor of the state. The prince, said Dante, is as truly called of God as the pope: the prince to be given the lesser temporal care and authority in the world; the pope to have the ultimate divine care and authority of the Christian Church. As the soul is of greater worth than the body, the Church is greater than the state. But as the soul depends for its earthly well-being on the body, the duties and powers of the state actually may be more in daily evidence than those of

the Church. The considerations of the state are immediate; those of the Church are ultimate. The prince is, therefore, chiefly a magistrate, while the pope is a final judge. To the popular mind of our time this distinction may seem strange. If so, it is because the external order of the world has changed. Modern political history has reversed it. The temporal state, today, has an excess of power over man. The result, to sum it up, has been twofold: in the contemplative realm, a tragic secularism; in the active realm, an inevitable, brutal tyranny.

This, then, is the hope, and the warning, that echoes down the ages to us from the *Divine Comedy*: "In His will is our peace." Christianity must be actively enthroned; Christ must rule; the Church must come to life and be the life of the community; princes must be Christians; Christians must know what they believe; the Christian faith must be the basis of social and moral conduct; life must be valued by the Christian standard; peace must be sought and kept with Christian justice; the arts and sciences must be directed to Christian ends; all our secular and mundane pursuits must be regarded for what they actually are: namely, temporal and mundane, not disallowed, but subjected to supra-mundane and eternal considerations.

This goal ought not to be unattainable in an age of science. It does not mean the destruction of man's natural passions, or his "rights" as he feels them, but their discipline by Christian reason. It is not any more an "idealistic" demand than the demand of any court of law which presupposes that men live rational lives; only it is a Christian rationale that is set up. Besides this, there is Christian mercy to cover human frailty; and it is demanded of all men in authority; for men in authority are themselves in need of this mercy; and the divine dispenser, both of authority and of mercy, is the historic Christian Church.

Dante did not desire that the Church should usurp the power of the state. The pope was a prince, but not an earthly one. Popes, too, could be tyrants in their day whenever they chose to forsake the duties of the sanctuary for the lure of the marketplace. Such a forsaking, Dante held, led to confusion. It tended to blur in men's minds the distinction, and the true relationship between the temporal order and the eternal. In short,

it was his belief that there should be one world church and one world empire. He wanted, first, a united Christendom, and second, a world of united Christian states. He desired not only that Christians be one body in Christ, but that, in their secular life and temporal pursuits, the people of the world be one community. Only so could there be a world understanding, an enrichment of individual life, and a hope of peace on earth.

The men of Florence in the fourteenth century, we say quite casually, had faith in God. And we speak of their faith as if it were a little thing which our age should not begrudge them. Else, we infer, they had a small lease on life, with the danger from disease so great and infant mortality at so high a rate. It would be wise in us not to forget that, in any age, it is only by our faith in Christ that we are rescued, at last, from an all-engulfing mortality. We do not need the age of Dante to teach us methods in agriculture, or sanitation, or military science. We excel it in a hundred outward ways. But, needing many things, that age excelled in one; that was its Christian faith. Learning did not shake that faith; suffering did not destroy it. It endured. And we now are the beneficiaries of a rich tradition. Ours, we conclude, is the task, first to keep that historic faith in good trust, and after that to increase its vital store in the world.

Chapter 2

SHAKESPEARE

We are pleased, at this grateful distance, by the fact that we know more about Shakespeare than did his contemporaries. The quantity of Shakespearean research is now immense. Very naturally, for this reason, it may seem to some of us that our prospectors, the Shakespearean scholars, looking for gold in the poet, have too often only dugged holes in his plays, leaving everywhere a great deal of overturned topsoil and a generally disfigured landscape for the lover of Shakespeare's poetry. But the result, in fact, has been a great gain in cultural wealth. More than any other poet, Shakespeare actually belongs to us. He is an item in our season's theater repertory, and a part—next to the Bible a very great part—of our hereditary tradition. We remember that it pleased Milton, in a happy moment, to crown him with the freshest of laurels and the rare epithet, "sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's Child." That is a coronation in which all of us happily join.

Writing of Shakespeare as a religious poet is a rather difficult task. Critics differ on the question of whether or not he was religious at all; whether he was essentially Christian, or pagan; Catholic, or Protestant. The problem is, of course, complicated by the fact that he lived during the Renaissance when England was the scene of many cross currents of thought, both religious and secular; and, beyond this, the complication is increased for us by the fact that Shakespeare was a dramatic poet, and so a poet of many voices, not every one of which can be taken to express Shakespeare's own view. Fortunately these circumstances need not distress or bewilder us. For Shakespeare's was a very clear, even if complex, mind; and the plays in which his philosophical ideas most frequently appear are

among those already well known to us, and are therefore within the easy scope of our further analysis.

Looking with special attention at the plays *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*, it may be convenient, at the beginning, to list four facts bearing on Shakespeare's religious thought. The first is his startling awareness of the problem of evil; the second, his recognition of sin as the root of this evil; the third, his belief in a supernatural power above the natural world order; the fourth, his acceptance of the historic Christian faith as the true basis of an understanding of life's meaning.

In *Hamlet*, more particularly, the poet lets us look on sin as a foul disease, breeding evil, calling for retribution, demanding the intervention of Providence and of divine judgment. In *Measure for Measure* our attention is specifically drawn to the sinner: first, to his deserved punishment; second, to his undeserved pardon and forgiveness. In these plays Shakespeare confronts the two age-old problems of justice and mercy; however, they are not treated by him secularly, as studies in social behavior, but as problems in Gospel ethics—notably in *Measure for Measure*, where the entire moral drama concerns itself with a transvaluation of values by definitely Christian standards. These standards have their basis in the Sermon on the Mount. But the play, as the plot clearly reveals, goes beyond purely ethical considerations to questions of divine judgment and grace, which are obviously theological. On these questions, as the play's title shows, Shakespeare, very definitely, had something to say. And it is of singular interest to us that he sacrificed nothing of his art or of his status as a dramatist to say it.

I

Shakespeare lived in England during the Reformation. But he was not one of the Reformers. It was, by tradition, a Catholic England that he knew. Mary Arden, his mother, seems to have been a communicant of the Church of Rome, and any changes of faith that may have been effected in him by England's adoption of Anglicanism were circumstantial and slight. Shakespeare was religious (as, by comparison, was Abraham

Lincoln) without making the defense of religion his chief concern. The Christian religion was his by birthright—just as he assumed it was England's—a rich national and social heritage.

But being such an invaluable heritage, the Christian faith was of vital interest to Shakespeare. His genius is actually never better shown than in those parts of his plays in which the characters are involved in some religious and moral struggle. We have an example of this fact in the play *King John*. In it the problem is first one of piety, second one of doctrine; and it involves the fundamental question of authority, the comparative authority of the church and the state. King John, we note, will not confirm the papal nominee for the important See of Canterbury. He declares he is king of England, and the church of England is a part of his realm. But the Christian church, the Pope declares, extends beyond England. It is universal. And the primacy of the spiritual extends also into temporal matters. So King John is excommunicated. When, as a result, John's kingdom is endangered and he relents, the Pope demands that France also lay down arms, and, when France refuses, the war is directed against her. In the controversy, the church not only holds the balance of temporal power, but has its spiritual authority openly vindicated.

This recognition of the supreme claim of religion and of the authority of the Christian church is typical of Shakespeare. An even more familiar example of it is found in *Hamlet*, in which Claudius the usurper-king, guilty also of murder, tries, after much evasion, to pray, but is not answered. He asks divine forgiveness, but will do no penance: he has no desire to make restitution, to restore the kingdom to its rightful king. Therefore, in the lines of the play, the poet has the king say:

Whereto serves mercy

But to confront the visage of offence?

And what's in prayer but this twofold force,

To be forestalled ere we come to fall,

Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up;

My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer

Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murder?"

That cannot be, since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?

But, though the world, as Shakespeare saw it, was, or was intended to be, by divine right Christian, it was not so by nature. The poet was sensitively aware of evil in the world; he attacked it, the ugliness of vice, and the base villainy of men. Yet he did not consider the world an evil creation, or human life a disastrous misfortune; rather, he saw the world in its two philosophical and essential aspects: (1) as a field of moral conflict, and (2) as a manifestation of divine providence. Looking about him on the world of men, he noted everywhere the antithesis of things; he saw, as in the character of Claudius, the proof of the dual nature of man. Generally, too, he found that men were of two types: those who sought refuge or peace in contemplation; and those who tried to find a release from inward stress through vigorous activity. The thinker and the man of action often met on the stage of life together, usually in irreconcilable conflict. Frequently, as in Prince Hamlet, they were found struggling for supremacy in one person.

Wherever Shakespeare looked he was struck by this fact of man's strife. Life on the terrestrial plane, on the mundane level where men lived, was out of balance. The display of this loss of equilibrium, of the all too human attempt at restoration, and of the consequent over-balance, was often ludicrous; and the result, as in *Measure for Measure*, was sharp comedy. The comic spirit united with the critical faculty of the poet in setting right some false notion, or queer anomalous situation, or quirk of fancy, or more serious delusion. All this contradictory interplay of ideas and emotions was pleasurable to look upon,—pleasurable enough so long as there was no deep-rooted disturbance. The proof of the duality of man's nature was clear enough; and there was a sense of relief when reason and laughter helped to restore the equilibrium necessary for practical living.

But, sometimes, the roots of conflict lay deep in the nature of man and of society. The human passions, man's sense of justice, his spiritual aspirations, his bewilderment in a world in which evil was obvious and powerful, rose to overwhelm him. The state of such conflict was tragedy. It was tragedy that logic could not avert, that laughter could not heal. The strong man could not escape it. And it laid its torturing hand on Shakespeare. Nothing human was alien to him; and that he had, as we may say, a heart for tragedy, together with an extraordinary sense of the reality of the supernatural, is shown in the remarkable first act of *Hamlet* in which the ghost of his father appears to the young prince, moving him to an utterance of words of horror, mingled with imploring prayer, as we note in this part of the dialogue of the fourth scene:

Hamlet. Angels and ministers of grace, defend us! . . .

What may this mean,

That thou, dead corse, . . .

Revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon,

Making night hideous; and we fools of nature

So horribly to shake our disposition

With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls? . . .

Horatio. He waxes desperate with imagination. . . .

Marcellus. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Horatio. Heaven will direct it.

For our better understanding of some of the root ideas of Shakespeare's poetry, it may be helpful here to present a summary of them in ten brief statements.

1. The world of Shakespeare is a moral world.
2. Evil is a reality, both cosmic and spiritual.
3. Man is involved in the conflict between good and evil.
4. The good life is lived only by divine help.
5. There is a place, in life, for crisis, and for spiritual regeneration.
6. The natural is overshadowed by the supernatural.
7. Poetry is a revelation of the poet's insight into the inter-relationship of the natural and the supernatural.

8. A Shakespearean tragedy is a spectacle of spiritual and moral forces in interplay, or counterplay, against the background of an overruling divine providence.
9. Man's history and destiny involve two worlds: the temporal, and the eternal.
10. The historic Christian faith is the true basis of differentiation between these two worlds.

II

Let us look with some attention at *Hamlet*. The play may be viewed as moving within a triangle. Its area is the world. At the base, in one corner, lurks *sin*, with Claudius and the queen as the evildoers enmeshed in their own evil deeds. On the same level, in the corner opposite, sits *worldly wisdom* in the persons of Polonius and Laertes his son. Polonius has no concern beyond a sycophant's curiosity, and he is slain through it, though quite by accident. At the apex of the pyramid, above any willful participation in the world's sin, though involved in it, helpless and almost hopeless, is Hamlet, the protagonist of the *soul*, sick with the sense of the evil in the world, maddened to desperation by the fetters that bind him to inaction, and, at last, with the fetters loosed, giving way to the violent action that consummates the tragedy. The tragedy of *Hamlet* is that of a sensitive soul pierced to intense agony by the fact of evil.

But Shakespeare does not stop by pointing to the hard fact of evil. He comes directly, and early in the play, to the problem of *sin*. It is, essentially, not a problem of the cosmos, or of the state of Denmark, but of the king's soul. No words of St. Augustine were ever a more direct commentary on the sinful life, or hardly any more theologically expressed, than these of Claudius:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
 It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
 A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
 Though inclination be as sharp as will:
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent.

Sin, in Shakespeare's sight, is not a mere physical weakness, or simply an uncivil, unsocial act; it is all this, but more; it is a corruption of the soul and an offense against heaven. The confession of the sinful Claudius illustrates and bears out the meaning of the strong words of the late Archbishop Temple who, in the recent book *Basic Convictions*,¹ said:

Do let us have done with that shallow nonsense which tells us that the sin of man consists in a survival of his animal instincts not quite completely subdued under a spirit and a reason that are still in process of development. It is the spirit and the reason that are corrupt. The sin is in the center of the organ of aspiration.

The tragedy is not that the flesh is frail. That is nature's way with all earthly things; whatever is born, must die. But to will the good, and still to do evil, that is tragedy. St. Augustine, we remember, puts the plain truth before us in a striking comparison when he says that, unlike the hand, the will does not move as we wish it; and he concludes, therefore, that the will in us has lost its original divine strength. In a word, man, in his present state of nature, is a fallen creature.

But Shakespeare, we note in the play, does not stop there, letting the broken will lie on the ground, like a shattered earthen jar. He does not leave man without hope. The king may find forgiveness. Prayer is open to him. Yet here too the way is divinely charted for him. Forgiveness is his only through penance, and by divine grace. The gate is open; but it is a strait gate; and Claudius, though he is full of words and wishful thinking, and contrives to utter pious wishes, is unforgiven, and so seals his own fate. The poet, as if expounding Christian doctrine, dramatizes the truth and lets us look into Claudius' mind:

What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? . . . But O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? . . .
May one be pardon'd and retain the offence? . . .

¹ Harper & Brothers, 1936.

What then? what rests?

Try what repentance can: what can it not?

Yet what can it when one cannot repent?

O wretched state! O bosom black as death!

O limed soul, that struggling to be free

Art more engaged! Help, angels! make assay!

Bow, stubborn knees, and, heart with strings of steel,

Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe!

All may be well. . . .

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;

Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

Nor is that all. Sin, unforgiven, spreads like a foul disease. It contaminates the world. At its root, the problem of evil is a religious one. The foul weed of sin spreads from its root into the air we breathe, into the world in which we live. It affects social institutions; it becomes itself an institution for the propagation of evil; it infests the state and creates its own evil state; it becomes, in time, a powerful force and, unless destroyed, sets up its own monarchy, and wears the dictator's crown.

The weapons of evil, as we see them displayed in *Hamlet*, are murder, incest, deception, and tyranny. Four of the Ten Commandments are broken in the course of the tragic play. Thus evil begets evil, crime breeds crime, sin, unforgiven, multiplies into sin; and it all happens, as Shakespeare points out, progressively and inevitably, this "unnatural" destruction of the divine nature or image in man. Evil grows. It follows the law of growth and, unless overcome by the higher law of the divine Spirit, leads to anarchy, first in the affections of man, then in the social community, and, ultimately, in the life of the state. Denmark, as Hamlet says, becomes a prison; the earth seems to him a "sterile promontory," and the air about him a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapours."

This destructive progress of evil, as Hamlet's sensitive nature perceives it, involves most tragically that which is most susceptible, most dear to him. Shakespeare represents it to us in the person of Hamlet's mother. Here, in love's image, we see the ghastly and ironical disfigurement of sin, as Hamlet,

thinking of his father's murder and of his mother's marriage to the murderer, says :

That it should come to this !

But two months dead ! nay, not so much, not two :
 So excellent a king ; that was, to this,
 Hyperion to a satyr : . . . Heaven and earth !
 Must I remember ? why, she would hang on him,
 As if increase of appetite had grown
 By what it fed on : and yet, within a month—
 Let me not think on't—Frailty, thy name is woman !

But here worldly wisdom interjects its voice. It speaks in the person of Polonius. It is a commanding voice, imperious, intruding, full of the sound of its own widespread doctrine. Polonius is a clever strategist ; he is a man of singular animal cunning. He answers the Queen's solicitude for Hamlet's health with the sophism :

That he is mad, 'tis true : 'tis true 'tis pity,
 And pity 'tis 'tis true.

He spies on his son's conduct in Machiavellian fashion, advising the hired spy to bait falsehood with the carp of truth, and to use every sort of windlass and assay of bias in order that he may "by indirections find directions out."

The advice Polonius gives to Laertes is, we may say, aptly adjusted to life in this world. It fits into the ethics of egoism, the code of natural as against Christian morality. Thomas Hobbes, in England, later approved it. According to it, man is an intelligent animal. He lives on sensation ; he gains advantage through his reason ; he seeks his own self-preservation. Altruists are fools. Society is made up of mutually tolerant egoists, men who know what they can have and how to use the contractual strategy to get it. So Polonius advises Laertes, and says :

Give thy thoughts no tongue,

Nor any unproportion'd thought his act.

Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar. . . .

Do not dull thy palm with entertainment

Of each new-hatch'd unfledged comrade. . . .

Beware

Of entrance to a quarrel; but being in,
Bear't, that the opposed may beware of thee. . . .
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice:
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment. . . .
Neither a borrower nor a lender be:
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.

Polonius knows the strategy of worldly men intent on worldly gain. But, by the Christian standard which Shakespeare implies, such a strategist does not actually look on the world with knowing eyes. He sees the world neither through the personal innocence of Ophelia nor through the objective realism of Hamlet. To the innocent Ophelia, the world is Eden. When it ceases to be such, she dies, strewing flowers to her grave,—“herbs of grace,” Shakespeare calls them; and Laertes, speaking in behalf of his sister, says:

Nature is fine in love, and where 'tis fine,
It sends some precious instance of itself
After the thing it loves.

Hamlet, though to him this is a sinful fallen world, does not curse heaven and earth. On the contrary, he finds the heavens exalting and the earth beautiful, and, at first, resents the intrusion of his father's ghost who tells him how evil the world is in which men commit evil and drag others with them into ghastly sin. By contrast, Polonius, mistaking the world mainly as a place to court the favor of the mighty and to fool the foolish, is himself only the King's puppet and, in Shakespeare's play, is deceived by his own worldly wisdom. One hears him doling out precepts and remembers, quite likely, the comforters of Job, those straw men, with their stuffed heads and hollow words, who talked weightily of justice but were empty of understanding.

Yet Shakespeare would have us look with mercy on these natural earthly children, on Laertes and Ophelia and their dotting foolish father. They are nature's children, not evil, but acted on by evil, the victims of the tragedy's evil plot, yet not

themselves tragic characters. They live, love, give advice, take advice, move others naturally, are themselves moved, quick to feel blood, to give blood, to shed blood. And they die as they have lived, naturally, and often pathetically; but we are not bewildered by their fate; we are less inclined to mourn their lot than to think them mercifully dead and at rest. In them the order of nature is depicted and divinely fulfilled. Within this natural order the cycle of life is completed in death, as it is begun in birth. Where natural law is unobstructed, there is no actual tragedy, but only discipline for the fit, and death for the unfit. Within this order the innocent persons suffer with the guilty. It is all one with nature: laughter and pain are interthreaded in the loom of our earthly life.

The entire play, of course, centers in Hamlet—not in his acts, but his thoughts—and at their nadir in the bewildering problem of evil. There, in the deep region of Shakespeare's mind, Hamlet struggles with the problem in its conflict with faith in a divine providence. Hamlet is the typical high-minded Renaissance man, medieval in his Christian background, but modern in his world outlook. He looks backward on a tradition of faith in a divine guidance, and forward on a world in which men take destiny into their own hands. Thus desperately caught between two opposite worlds, the secular and the supernatural, and being the kind of humanist that he is, both idealistic and helpless, he cries out against the sordid evidence of sin and says:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on 't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

The words are spoken under emotional stress, rashly, but with unmistakable religious focus. The world—in a direct allusion

to Matthew XIII: 24-30—is an unweeded garden. But the canon of the Everlasting still stands, fixed against evil, Shakespeare is here saying; and it is written into the moral law of every Christian land, in the words, “Thou shalt not kill.” “Thou shalt not steal.” But Claudius, the usurper, has killed and he has stolen. Thus the world defies the law of God.

What, then, is to be done? Nothing? On the contrary, Hamlet must be heaven’s hound, its avenger, appointed to seek out the evildoer, establish his guilt, and administer divine justice. So he arranges the trial play in which we see an example of the strategy necessary to ferret out evil. Divine justice, we are to learn, is not soft and easy-trusting, but durable, realistic, uncompromising. It must be so. For evil is not only abhorrent; it is strong and crafty. The devil must be caught in his own net; else he devises, according to his nature, to deceive and to destroy. And so, in the play, Claudius is found guilty, not through a trial by jury, but by the judgment of the higher spirit that is in him, which is his still surviving Christian conscience.

That is as far as Hamlet can go. The play begins and ends on the note of divine justice. The law of heaven acts against the evildoer; there is retribution for sin; and, near the play’s end, Hamlet, as if reaching for some approving seal of Holy Scripture, says: “There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.” Of mercy for the sinner and redemption from sin, of pardon and restitution and heavenly grace, this great tragedy gives us an inkling but no clear outline,—resembling in this respect the poetry of judgment of the Old Testament Psalms. Yet, within its own limit, *Hamlet* is a play of overwhelming importance. It is a ruthless indictment of evil and of all those who traffic in evil, privately and publicly, and seek to obstruct the course of justice and the hope of world order.

Few men have sensed with a heavier and duller pain than was Shakespeare’s the colossal conflict of good and evil on a level above the simply natural order; and none, it seems to this writer, would more willingly agree to the fundamental Christian view, as it is expressed today, that the social order does not exist solely for itself, or merely for men’s comfort and pleasure,

or to satisfy unscrupulous demagogues, or secular theorizers; but that it is, to use the words of Christopher Dawson, "a *sacred order*, by which human action is conformed to the divine and eternal law." If this is so, the play *Hamlet* without attempting to be theological is, by every inference in it, consistent with sound Christian teaching.

III

There is one play of Shakespeare in which, more than in any other, both the ethics and the eschatology of the Gospels are made clear. It is *Measure for Measure*. In it Christian redemption, divine forgiveness and mercy, and the life of righteousness are the well co-ordinated themes. Its very title, we note, is taken from Matthew VII: 1-2, where we read: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again."

Measure for Measure is a New Testament play, and a criticism of Christian morality. The plot is carefully constructed; the ideas form an artistic pattern; the style is purposefully restrained; the symbolism is theologically correct; its spiritual insight is extraordinary. The characters, obviously, are types: Angelo, of the Pharisee; Isabella, of the chaste Puritan; Lucio, of the worldly pagan; Claudio, of the wretched sinner; the Duke, of Christian mercy and justice. The play's thesis, we have said, is a double one: the good life and the last judgment are treated together,—as they are in the Sermon on the Mount. One cannot read the play without thinking of the parable, in Matthew XXV, beginning with the words:

For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.

The satire of Christ's judgment against the Pharisees, and his definition of true discipleship, are alike reflected in these words of the Duke to Angelo:

There is a kind of character in thy life,
 That to th' observer doth thy history
 Fully unfold. Thyself and thy belongings
 Are not thine own so proper, as to waste
 Thyself upon thy virtues, they on thee.
 Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
 Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues
 Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
 As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely touch'd
 But to fine issues; nor Nature never lends
 The smallest scruple of her excellence,
 But, like a thrifty goddess, she determines
 Herself the glory of a creditor,
 Both thanks and use.

The Third Act of *Measure for Measure* contains a passage that merits our particular attention. In it the Duke—he is a humble friar in the scene—is asked whence he is come, and he answers, “Not of this country, though my chance is now to use it for my time.” He is asked for the latest news, and his answer again is on the level above the mundane, as he says:

None, but that there is so great a fever on goodness, that the dissolution of it must cure it: novelty is only in request; and it is as dangerous to be aged in any kind of course, as it is virtuous to be constant in any undertaking. There is scarce truth enough alive to make societies secure; but security enough to make fellowships accurst;—much upon this riddle runs the wisdom of the world.

This “fever on goodness” was not confined to Elizabethan times. It persists, to this day, in the form of an artificial Puritanism that is the antithesis of the good life as set forth in the Gospels. We are all familiar, for instance, with Hawthorne’s description of it: its state of fear, of inflamed suppressed passion; its substitution of self-righteousness for the grace of forgiveness; its arrogance; its mercilessness; its final breakdown. Shakespeare, in the play, reckons with those who would rather count themselves sinless than blest and forgiven. He lets Angelo, swollen with a sense of his responsibility and sincerity,

say, "It is the law." Have we not, all of us, heard these scrupulous, yet evasive, words?

But let us look again at Angelo. From the pinnacle of these proud words, so devoid alike of human insight and of Christian grace, he falls wretchedly into sin. He does not know the deep gulf between the rash word and the weak flesh. There is, indeed, a law of nature. It is active in our members. St. Paul calls it the law of the flesh. Evil forces work by that law, well aware that, though the flesh is not itself evil, it is very easily susceptible to evil. But there is another law active in us. It is, according to St. Paul, the law of the Spirit, and the dispenser to us of heavenly grace. By it human nature is transformed, the flesh is made subservient, and man is set free. Angelo, understanding neither law, and relying solely on himself, falls from the peak of his pride into base lust. And when he falls, there are no ready arms of mercy to intercept his fall. He hurls headlong, heedless of grace, past restraint, toward dire judgment.

It is interesting to follow Angelo through to the end. We see him turn from good to evil with the callous mind of one who knows neither the mystery nor the morality of the Gospels; we trace his degeneration, through foolhardiness to mad violence and self-accusation; and, at the close of the scene, just as the trumpets are about to announce the return of the Duke, as the signal of the day of judgment, we hear Angelo himself utter the final verdict:

Alack, when once our grace we have forgot,
Nothing goes right: we would, and we would not.

When in Act V the time is come to deal out "measure for measure," there is a Babel of accusation against Angelo, which is relieved by a display of humor that has the serious intent of ensnaring the evildoer in the net of his own evil deeds. Angelo is discovered. Dealing out quick judgment on himself, he desires death. But the Duke, in whom Angelo has come to recognize the presence of a "grace, like power divine," does not demand the sinful man's death. He asks of him only the sign, and in his behalf only for the sacrament of penance. That, we find,

in construing the ultimate meaning of the play, is Shakespeare's own verdict.

Everywhere in *Measure for Measure*, there are visible signs of its allegorical and theological character. Besides being good drama, it is quite clearly an exposition of Gospel ethics. But what of its eschatology? Scholars of Shakespeare, unless they are also critics in theology, may possibly feel inclined to deny the play any eschatological content; but no profound, and certainly no strained, examination of the play's use of Scriptural symbolism is required to see in it an interpretation of the Parable of the Talents, recorded in Matthew xxv, as well as a study in Christian ethics, based on Matthew vii.

In the final analysis, it is the play's anagogical or mystical meaning that is most important. If so, Shakespeare must have desired, by means of the play, to present to us a drama of history; and, more particularly, in the characters of the Duke and Isabella, to convey to us the revealed and historic truth of the love of Christ for the Church which is his Bride—for whose chastening and education he provides through the necessary vicissitudes of living in the world, and whom he welcomes, at last, to the bridal feast in the everlasting kingdom of Heaven. The play is strewn with allusions to passages from Holy Scripture, of which these final and closing words of the Duke to Isabella are typical:

Dear Isabel,

I have a motion much imports your good;
Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,
What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine.

Recently, one September day on an Ohio farm, three men looked down from the little hill of the farmyard toward the lake across a crop of ripening corn. The stalks of corn stood in rows like sentinels wearing plumes and carrying arms with heavy holsters. One of the three men said: "This is a fine sight for eyes to see; no artist could so paint it, this green luxuriance of the corn, and this developing gold of the ear in the corn." The second one said: "See those roots; there is a double row of them, branching out, like a man's fingers, into

the soil to keep the stalk standing straight against the wind; you must take hold of those ears, two to the stalk, of the new hybrid variety known as 405 *DeKalb*." The third said, simply, and with satisfying praise: "This corn will fill the bins and feed the stock, and help supply the need of food for the coming winter." Quite unconsciously, these three young men were good critics,—and of three essential types. The first voiced the artist's pleasure; the second, the student's analytical skill; the third, the practical man's judgment.

It is so when men look variously at a sonnet or a scene in a play of Shakespeare. One will read the lines and say: "Here is exquisite beauty." Another will hear them read and say: "Here is literary style." A third person will ponder what has been written and will say: "Here is food for long thought." In *The Tempest*, Ariel sings to Ferdinand:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

One, among us, who reads the song will be moved to repeat the lines out of sheer pleasure; another will examine the diction and test the imagery of the coral and the pearl; another will read the poem to himself quite slowly, seeking to trace in it the poet's deeper meaning of the "sea-change" that is called death. Shakespeare, we conclude, may be read by us on three levels: for our personal entertainment; for his literary style; and, beyond these aims, for his answer to the world's hunger for the truth about the meaning of life.

Chapter 3

MILTON

It has come to be a tradition to praise Milton's majestic style. Everything he writes is "noble." The theme and the language, alike, are in the lofty key: the pure diction of the poet; the serene, cold height of his reasoning; the formal, structural technique of his verse; his mood of austerity; his fastidious sensibility; his aristocratic, intellectual manner, and his large egoism—all these are as well known, as keenly felt, as are the two peculiar qualities which make his poetry a rare and exquisite art; namely, its "brocaded beauty" and its "orchestrated harmony." Milton, for these reasons, is a poet's poet. He is good reading for those who can read him. Writers, scholars, artists, men who delight in thinking and are disciplined to it, dig with much profit in his poetry for the ore with which he fills every rift of his rugged and vast imagination. Others are amazed, left unmoved, or repelled by his hard grandeur.

I

Of those who go to Milton's poems for religious instruction, perhaps more are awe-struck, at first, than spiritually fed. For Milton is austere. He is, one may say, more at home on Mt. Olympus than on the broad plains of humanity, and seems to prefer, in biblical parallel, Mt. Sinai to the hill of Calvary. That is, he is by nature or personal temperament an Old Testament prophet rather than a New Testament evangelist. That is why, on the whole, he does better by Adam in *Paradise Lost* than by Christ in its sequel, *Paradise Regained*.

In *Paradise Lost* Milton rises to the height of a great argument in defense of the divine sovereignty and justice by which Satan is banished from heaven and sentenced to suffer forever in hell. But, though fallen, Satan retains his proud character,

and pursues his arrogant and evil aim which is to build in hell a kingdom that shall rival that of heaven. And Satan's journey through chaos to paradise, and the subtle, superior craft he employs in the temptation of Adam and Eve, seem to add to the Tempter's prestige as a mighty personage of the world rather than to the credit and character of the first parents.

"Christ in *Paradise Regained*," someone has recently said, "is an austere, unsympathetic classical philosopher." This is an austere verdict. It fits, as some readers sense it, Milton's prevailing mood; though everyone will find, looking about him a little as he reads, those mild and gentle passages in the poem that are, like mountain flowers, the more delicate for their lofty surroundings. It should be added that in *Paradise Regained*, contrary to a somewhat settled opinion, Milton does not actually make the Temptation the Atonement, but rather the preparation to the death of Christ, as we see when we look at these lines:

But first I mean

To exercise him in the wilderness;
There he shall first lay down the rudiments
Of this great warfare, ere I send him forth
To conquer Sin and Death the two grand foes,
By humiliation and strong sufferance.

It is not untrue to say that the virtues Milton chiefly extols in his heroes are the cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, temperance, and fortitude, enjoined on men in classical times by Aristotle. And we note, for instance, that in the story of the Temptation in Book II of *Paradise Regained* Jesus, answering Satan's luring promise of riches, calls to witness both biblical and pagan heroes as he mentions,

Gideon and Jephtha, and the shepherd lad,
Whose offspring on the throne of Judah sat
So many ages, and . . . canst thou not remember
Quintius, Fabricius, Curius, Regulus?
For I esteem those names of men so poor
Who could do mighty things, and could contemn
Riches though offered from the hand of kings.

If in Milton's thought the temptation of Jesus overshadows the crucifixion, it must be remembered that a poem is better judged by what it intends than by what it omits. And Milton's intent is definitely moral. He is a Puritan. His stress is on the ethical example of Christ. The Cross is not ignored; it is accepted as the logical outcome of Christ's heroic life. It is the struggle of good with evil that counts with Milton; and no Gospel event tests the character of Christ so magnificently, yet so realistically, in terms of the things for which men fight—that is, for bread, for religious certainty, and for temporal power—as the wilderness temptation. Here the poet's thought is at its best, where, as Robert Browning (possibly thinking of such a man as Milton) once put it, "Meteors shoot, clouds form, lightnings are loosened, Stars come and go." The picture of Jesus returning from the wilderness, victorious, welcomed by a fiery globe of angels, wholly fills the poet's mind as he writes:

Who on their plummy vans received Him soft
From his uneasy station, and upbore
As on a floating couch through the blithe air,
Then in a flowery valley set him down
On a green bank, and set before him spread
A table of celestial food, divine,
Ambrosial, fruits fetched from the Tree of Life,
And from the Fount of Life ambrosial drink
That soon refreshed him wearied, and repaired
What hunger, if aught hunger had impaired,
Or thirst, and as he fed, angelic choirs
Sang heavenly anthems of his victory
Over temptation and the Tempter proud.

This, we grant, is great poetry. There is nothing quite equal to it in our literature, nothing so profoundly original, so chastened, so elevated, and dedicated to the understanding of Christian truth.

Yet Lord David Cecil says, in his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, that Milton was a philosopher rather than a devotee, that theology to him was a superior branch of political science, representing the rule of reason and the moral law as exhibited in the working of the cosmos. "Nor was his

moral sensibility," Lord Cecil adds, "a Christian one. The Stoic virtues, fortitude, temperance, and above all, moral independence, were what he valued. He did not live by faith, scorned hope, and was indisposed to charity; while pride, so far from being the vice which Christianity considers it, was to Milton the mark of a superior nature." These cold words, spoken in judgment of the poet, do not take into account, as we have said, the lines of tenderness and trust that are strewn, like Alpine flowers, among his lofty thoughts. It is granted that humility is for Milton not an easy grace. Nevertheless, it is a Christian virtue with him; while pride, with which the poet is wrongly charged of doing honor to Satan, is in reality the satanic vice that *Paradise Lost* shows it to be.

We must take Milton as he is. And to do so it is necessary to rise to his height. The truth about him is well told by the poet Wordsworth—who probably understood him better than Lord Cecil—when he says:

Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

Greatness like this in a man is not incomprehensible. Rather, it is alluring and deeply satisfying. Milton's mind moved, like a planet, in its own element, in the orbit of its own being. Nobility of mind was a kind of second nature to him. Yet Milton was a true man among men; and we are nearer to the truth to call him a practical saint than a speculative philosopher. He is, at the last, not so near the metaphysics of Aristotle as the Gospel beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

It will help us to understand Milton better to let him tell us how this pure essence of the mind is caught and stored in great literature. Writing in the *Areopagitica*, he says,

... books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose

progeny they are; . . . as good almost kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, in the eye. . . . a good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.

In Milton's eyes, the mind dedicated to God is a citadel of truth; and the poet is a man, so dedicated, on whom the scepter of divine authority is laid. He is inspired of God. In a characteristic passage, now famous, Milton tells us how a poet's power is given to him. It is, he says,

. . . not to be obtained by the invocation of Dame Memory and her siren daughters, but by devout prayer to that eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases.

Such is Milton's lofty conception of the poet's mission. In his introduction to the *Reason of Church Government* he gives us this impressive summary of the office of the Christian poet. It is, he says, "to inbreed and cherish in a . . . people the seeds of virtue and public civility; to allay the perturbations of the mind, and set the affections in right tune; to celebrate in glorious and lofty hymns the throne and equipage of God's almightiness; . . . to sing the victorious agonies of martyrs and saints; . . . and to deplore the general relapses of kingdoms and states from justice and God's true worship."

II

Milton's formative ideas, when examined closely, are seen to stem from two vital roots: the first, the Renaissance tradition of humanism and classical culture; the second, the biblical tradition of Christian doctrine and revelation. In their growth these ideas intertwine to form an organic massive structure. The temper of the age was toward individual freedom and the authority of reason; and it is noticeable that Milton bends the strong argument of his Classical-Christian reasoning toward the

cause of the free man. He asks: What is man's freedom and whence is it derived? And, if lost, how regained?

Milton's answers are his prose writings, which are strongly political; and his poetry which, logically presupposing this groundwork of prose, moves to a consideration of transcendental values. He insists very soundly that the life of the free man, whether viewed personally or socially, has a Christian basis, that it rests historically on the tradition of Holy Scripture, and that its foundation in ultimate fact is the doctrine of the divine Incarnation.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find Milton giving early expression to this view in the Advent poem, *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, written in 1629 at Cambridge, then, quite significantly, beginning to be the citadel of Platonism. In this Christmas poem, side by side with festive joy, he firmly stresses the fact of sin. The emphasis, pertinently, is on the threefold fact of the earth's *beauty*, its *bondage* to Satan, and the *promise* that lies in the heavenly child born in the lowly manger. Here is how Milton sets forth the holy event in the form of Christian story and doctrine:

Yea, Truth and Justice then
Will down return to men,
Orbed in a rainbow; . . .
But wisest Fate says No,
This must not yet be so,
The Babe lies yet in smiling infancy,
That on the bitter cross
Must redeem our loss, . . .
The agèd Earth aghast
With terror of that blast,
Shall from the surface to the center shake; . . .
And then at last our bliss
Full and perfect is,
But now begins; for from this happy day
The old Dragon under ground
In straiter limits bound,
Not half so far casts his usurpèd sway,
And wroth to see his kingdom fail,
Swings the scaly horror of his folded tail.

A year later, Milton, then only twenty-two, wrote a poem entitled *The Passion*. Our Christian faith, he knew, revolved on two axes: the Incarnation and the Cross; and it was now his aim to write on the second of these two themes. He learned, however, that his insight for the task was not yet large enough, and the poem, after eight stanzas, was left unfinished. But, though a lesser poem, the *Passion* is Christian to the core. It has in it content for a profound sermon, and any man ordained to preach God's word, whose tongue is dry for want of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, may well dip into such a stanza as this for a refreshing draught of water from the well:

He sovran Priest, stooping his regal head,
That dropped with odorous oil down his fair eyes,
Poor fleshly tabernacle entered.
His starry front low-roofed beneath the skies;
Oh what a mask was there, what a disguise!
Yet more: the stroke of death he must abide,
Then lies him meekly down fast by his brethren's side.

Christ's sovereignty and divine humiliation, and man's redemption and divine exaltation, are here brought together by the poet's hand. But for Milton there were greater words to come, of which these were only an inkling and a shadow.

Meanwhile, the poet turns to this world—as all free Christian men must whilst they live in it—and looks on it wisely, and in two varying moods. In the one, he writes *L'Allegro*, in praise of mirth; in the other, *Il Penseroso*, in praise of contemplation. Speaking in the spirit of the Renaissance, he seems to say: "You may take this earthly life actively and live it out joyously in nature, in human experience, and in art; or, you may look on it with eyes made clear through silence and, while you live it, view it as a thing of transitory beauty, designed to turn the mind toward serious study and toward religious thought." Milton comes to this conclusion at the end of the two poems:

. . . let my due feet never fail
To walk the studious cloister's pale,
And love the high embow'd roof,
With antique pillars massy proof,

And storied windows richly dight,
Casting a dim religious light.
There let the pealing organ blow
To the full-voiced quire below,
In service high and anthems clear,
As may with sweetness, through mine ear,
Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all Heaven before mine eyes.

Next Milton wrote *Comus*, called a masque, which on its surface was entertaining and pagan, but underneath dealt with a Christian theme, the problem of sin. According to Milton purity of heart, interpreted as moral chastity, was a heavenly virtue, chiefest of all virtues. By it, he believed, the soul was joined in mystic union with God. Into the face of evil which he associates with "envious darkness" and the "thievish night," he utters these pure words:

O welcome pure-eyed Faith, white-handed Hope,
Thou hovering angel girt with golden wings,
And thou unblemished form of Chastity,
I see thee visibly, and now believe
That He, the Supreme Good, to whom all things ill
Are but as slavish officers of vengeance,
Would send a glistering guardian if need were
To keep my life and honor unassailed.

The Christian is a free man, and is pure of heart. But there is also in him a passion to be dedicated to a great cause. If one may interpret such a man of multiple genius as Milton, this was his supreme mission as a poet. Continuing, one can say that he believed the poet to be a pastor, the shepherd of souls, of God's flock. Such is the main idea underlying the poem *Lycidas*, an elegiac pastoral poem, in which the poet pours out his grief, and his indignation, in a stanza once thought to mar the pastoral beauty of the poem, but now for all time famous:

Last came, and last did go,
The Pilot of the Galilean Lake;
Two massy keys he bore of metals twain:
(The golden opes, the iron shuts amain).

He shook his mitred locks, and stern bespake,
 "How well could I have spared for thee, young swain,
 Enough of such as for their bellies' sake,
 Creep and intrude and climb into the fold!
 Of other care they little reckoning make,
 Than how to scramble at the shearers' feast,
 And shove away the worthy bidden guest;
 Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold
 A sheep-hook, or have learnt aught else the least
 That to the faithful herdsman's art belongs!
 What recks it them? What need they? They are sped; . . .
 The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed."

Line after line of the New Testament is echoed in this passage: through St. Peter, through the parable of the Good Shepherd, through the judgment parable of the Marriage Feast. It presents Milton to us as a Gospel poet. "Blind mouths!" How like a bolt of lightning these words, so strangely juxtaposed, strike and rive the Christian conscience! One invariably thinks of John Ruskin's comment on them in *Sesame and Lilies*: "A *Bishop* means 'a person who sees.' The most unbishoply character a man can have is therefore to be Blind. A *Pastor* means 'a person who feeds.' The most unpastoral is, instead of feeding, to want to be fed—to be a Mouth."

III

Milton's faith found its main root in the doctrine of revelation. Whatever was divine was something supernaturally revealed. It was not simply something found in nature, felt in the blood, or flowering from the earth. Man, he held, received it from above. It came to him both as an intervention and as a gift: an intervention into his human nature, a gift to his immortal spirit.

As we look more closely at his poetry, we see this doctrine of revelation set forth in four important aspects. The first is its representation as the inner light of the mind. The poet's blindness intensified, but did not create, this doctrine. It had its origin in the Bible, in the Neo-Platonism of the time, and in Milton's own soul. There seems, from the beginning of the

poet's career, to have been a large and triumphant intelligence at work in him which, for our convenience, we may try to picture as a rational solar sphere in which ideas, like objects large and small, appeared and disappeared, or floated like dark masses across a shining plain. There was in him almost no suggestion of the searching, groping mind. The stress, in him, was on awareness, self-knowledge, and a clear reasoning consciousness of God. There are lines in *Comus*, written years before his loss of sight, that set forth this doctrine:

He that has light within his own clear breast
May sit in the center, and enjoy bright day,
But he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts
Benighted walks under the mid-day sun;
Himself is his own dungeon.

We can easily see how, as the outer world darkened before him, the light within his mind became more intense. With the pain of total outer darkness came the ecstasy of spiritual vision. The light was now wholly gathered within him, and its shining gave to his thoughts a heavenly character. It was in this light, Milton believed, that man became aware of his own divine nature, his soul, rising from his earth-born nature to his rightful state of a son of light. In this state of illumination, in which divine reason rules over natural passion,

He who receives
Light from above, from the Fountain of Light,
No other doctrine needs.

The Christian is heaven-taught. For Christ himself is the heavenly effulgence of God who Himself is light. This is the second fundamental truth of Milton's doctrine of divine revelation. It centers in the highest concept of God in whom *infinite reason* and *infinite love* are represented by the poet in the blending of two figures, when he says:

Fountain of light, thy self invisible
Amidst the glorious brightness where thou sit'st
Throned inaccessible.

How much of this doctrine the poet owed to the book of Isaiah, and how much to such a scene in the Gospels as the Transfiguration, is a question of interest. The Bible was unquestionably Milton's great guidebook. He loved and revered the Old Testament, regarding it as the New Testament's revelatory foundation. We can without effort imagine him, sightless in his later years, repeating the words of Isaiah's inaugural vision:

In the year
That king Uzziah died
I saw also the Lord
Sitting upon a throne,
High and lifted up,
And his train filled the temple.
Above it stood the seraphim; . . .
And one cried unto another, and said,
Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts:
The whole earth is full of his glory.

And no scene in Christ's life could have pleased Milton more than that of the Transfiguration. Here were the elements exactly suited to the poet's imagination and faith: the high mountain; the Master's shining raiment; the appearance of Moses and Elias; the overshadowing cloud; the voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son"; the bewilderment of Peter; the undertone of tragedy; the assurance of redemption and of immortality. It matched the scene of the Temptation which Milton himself depicted in *Paradise Regained*. In both there is the magnitude of heavenly drama, a spectacle that involves the redemption of man and the history of the world. Good and evil are in conflict; God is Himself in the struggle; He is the invisible King; heaven is His footstool; His throne is light; creation is that light shining; and Christ is the first of created beings, created of God before time, out of His own eternal light, the Father's only-begotten Son:

Effulgence of my glory, Son beloved,
Son, in whose face invisible is beheld
Visibly, what by Deity I am.

The third fundamental truth of Milton's doctrine of revelation concerns the person and earthly mission of Christ. The Christology of Milton is inseparable from his cosmology. He considers the Creation and the Trinity together, and views the Father as the uncreated Absolute, the Son as the First Creation, and the Holy Spirit as the all-shaping and emanating spirit of the Son. The first of created things is light. Of it the poet writes in *Paradise Lost*:

Hail, holy Light, offspring of Heaven, first-born!
Or of the Eternal coeternal beam
May I express thee unblamed? since God is light,
And never but in unapproached light
Dwelt from eternity, dwelt then in thee,
Bright effluence of bright essence increate!

From Himself, in the person of the Son, God cast His mantle of light to form the world out of chaos. Hence the cosmos, or divine matter, out of which God with His own hand formed the earth and the first Adam. Man, therefore, is God-formed, and the breath in him is the breath of the Holy Spirit. So we, by a divine plan, are nobly created. Our whole being is, by origin, of God, who is manifest on an ascending scale of being in all earthly creatures. Man, next to the angels, is the apex of creation. In him the upward-working spirit has taken the body with it on the scale toward God,—as the angel Raphael, in *Paradise Lost*, explains the truth to Adam:

O Adam! One Almighty is, from Whom
All things proceed, and up to him return,
If not deprav'd from good, . . .
Till body up to spirit work, in bounds
Proportioned to each kind. So from the root
Springs lighter the green stalk; from thence the leaves
More aery; last the bright consummate flower
Spirits odorous breathes; flowers and their fruit,
Man's nourishment, by gradual scale sublimed
To vital spirits aspire, to animal,
To intellectual; give both life and sense,

Fancy and understanding; whence the soul
Reason receives; and reason is her being,
Discursive or intuitive.

But man is now a fallen creature. The cause of his fall is sin; and sin brings death, not to man only, but through him to all created nature. That, Milton tells us, is the hard fact we see as we look about us on the natural world. Man's sin has broken his otherwise natural progress toward God, that progress of spirit which would have taken nature with it into a more and more divine form or state of existence. Since then the whole creation "groaneth to be delivered." It is in travail, but not without hope. For the Second Adam is come. He is Christ. His coming has stopped the otherwise necessary fall of man for his sin and guilt into a second or final death, the death of all spirit in nature, leaving only endlessly enduring matter. Through Christ's coming—through His incarnation, His victory over temptation, and His resurrection—man and nature after Him have begun again their upward journey toward God. By faith in Christ man is reborn, is victorious over temptation and sin, and assured of a personal immortality according to the promise of the word of God. That, in summary, is Milton's Christian faith as reflected in this immortal poem.

But, more specifically, for man's life here and now, Christ represents the rule of reason over passion, the flesh's obedience to the spirit, the world's acceptance of the sovereignty of God. Jesus of Nazareth is of secondary interest to Milton. His mind is on Christ the son of God. The Virgin birth and the death of Christ have a lesser part in the poet's theology. These great truths are not ignored. They are underestimated. That, admittedly, is a fault in Milton's Christian teaching.

The fourth doctrine, basic to Milton's idea of revelation, has to do with the nature of man and his place in the world. Man, according to our poet, is a creature in whom dwell two powers: reason and passion. To submit to passion is slavery; to be governed by reason is to be free. The Christian is the free man. In him reason attains its full, its divine character. He

is a true son, living in the liberty of God's elect, whom the spirit guides and illuminates, and whose judgment and conscience are in mutual and complete accord.

Man, Milton says in one of his great prose utterances, the *Defensio Secunda*, must govern himself. Political liberty, acquired through force of arms, or through legislation, cannot go beyond moral freedom. Self-government is heaven's law for man. It is divine. Piety springs from it as fruit from a tree. All despotism, in last analysis, is domestic. Its root, according to Milton, is evil desire. It is the lust of the flesh. Milton's Puritanism comes partly from his own experience, partly from the innate nobility of his mind. He writes in the *Defensio*:

Unless by the means of piety, not frothy and loquacious, but operative, unadulterated, and sincere, you clear the horizon of the mind from those mists of superstition which arise from the ignorance of true religion, you will always have those who will bend your necks to the yoke as if you were brutes, who, notwithstanding all your triumphs, will put you up to the highest bidder, as if you were mere booty made in war; and will find an exuberant source of wealth in your ignorance and superstition.

Two dangers confront man: on the lower level, bodily desire; on the higher, the perversion of reason. Against both there exists but one remedy; it is obedience to divine law, to the will of God. Milton's message to Cromwell's England in the time of its great crisis may be summed up in these plain statements:

1. Clear the horizon of your minds from the mists of ignorance, the ignorance of true religion.
2. True religion is the fruit of the regenerate mind, the mind of Christ.
3. To have the mind of Christ is to be free.
4. The community of free men is God's kingdom in the world.
5. Through them God sets Himself against the tyrants of the world.
6. Learn, therefore, to obey the free mind of Christ in you, and so to govern yourselves.

This, then, is the free man held before us by Milton and typified in the person of Christ in whom "the Son joins Manhood to Godhood," and whom the angel Michael pictures to us in the twelfth book of *Paradise Lost*. The background in the closing scene, against which Michael's words are spoken, is dark. Satan, the arch-rebel, disobedient from the beginning, and a usurper—according to Milton's picture of him, a proud imperious tyrant, stooping to basest malice to "repair his injured merit"—has plotted man's downfall, and succeeded; and he now plans to build his own evil empire. But God Himself is in the historic drama, and it is not to end in tragedy. Michael leads Adam to a high hill where, together, they look into the events of the time to come. Adam, seeing the rainbow after the flood, asks,

What mean those colored streaks in Heaven,
Distended as the brow of God appeased?

And Michael answers,

Such grace shall one just man find in his sight,
That he relents, not to blot out mankind.

But that is not all. A greater gift than continued earthly existence is in store for man. One greater than Noah will rise through Abraham and his seed, and he will crush the serpent's head, and though "to death condemned, . . . nailed to the cross. . . slain for bringing life," he will rise out of death to judge the nations; after which,

. . . the Earth
Shall all be Paradise, far happier place
Than this of Eden, and far happier days.

Milton then reiterates, for all to read, the poem's central theme in Adam's comprehending, grateful words:

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good; more wonderful
Than that which by creation first brought forth
Light out of darkness!

IV

There is, in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, a remarkable passage that has something of the high character of Holy Scripture. Beneath the pagan lay, the story of the fight with evil monsters, there lies, as in a parable, the essence of gospel truth. The unknown poet, a Northumbrian Christian writing in a monastery close to the year 750, is himself brooding on the question of the world and the supernatural. The monster Grendel, according to the story, has been defeated; the land battle has been won. It has taken place on the more tangible level of human nature. But the evil force of Grendel's mother is more insidious. The fight with her occurs in the deep mysterious sea. Beowulf cannot overcome the sea-wolf by his own strength. His sword breaks and fails him. Evil, despite the hero's fierce endeavor, has the upper hand. The hero is saved, the poet says, by good fortune and by "the strength of God." At the moment of his extremity, when his harness is almost hewn from him and nothing avails, by what seems a strange coincidence he finds a sword. It is there in the deep dungeon for him. God has provided it, the poet says, and with it the dragon is slain. It was a valiant fight, won by sheer faith, and heaven's ordered plan. The poet of *Beowulf* adds, significantly,

A light flashed out from the den
Like heaven's candle.

Man alone, says Milton, is helpless. Like Adam, driven from Eden, he has lost his innocence, his original strength. But if, living in the world, he has thought at all wisely, he knows his need of God. Milton's Samson in the poem *Samson Agonistes*, while he feels himself God-forsaken, is weak. But, with faith restored, he is mighty against the mockery of the Philistines. A heavenly grace rests on him in his agony. His case is not hopeless, Samson says, though he stands eyeless and chained in the temple of the evil god Dagon. And when the temple falls, he is avenged. Truth is vindicated; and, though

Samson dies, the Lord of Israel lives and reigns. And the poet, closing the poem, warns us against a trivial or hopeless view of life when he says :

Come, come, no time for lamentation now,
 Nor much more cause, Samson hath quit himself
 Like Samson, and heroically hath finished
 A life heroic, on his enemies
 Fully revenged, . . . To Israel
 Honor hath left, and freedom, . . .
 Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
 Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
 Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
 And what may quiet us in a death so noble.

The gods once dwelt on Mount Olympus. The Seasons, graceful goddesses, opened the gate of clouds and let them come to earth when they wished; Hebe handed round the ambrosia and the nectar; Apollo played the lyre. Homer the poet heard the heavenly music and, in the *Odyssey*, drew this picture of the Olympian scene :

So saying, Minerva, goddess azure-eyed,
 Rose to Olympus, the reputed seat
 Eternal of the gods, which never storms
 Disturb, rains drench, or snow invades, but calm
 The expanse and cloudless shines with purest day.
 There the inhabitants divine rejoice
 Forever.

(*Thomas Bulfinch*)

All that is gone now, like mist from the mountains, say the modern wise men; it is possible to see clearly, now, that there are no deities there. We are not given over to trances. We shun prophecy as we do epilepsy. Our tax receipts are more real to us than the cry of Cassandra. We have the earth to feed, and to occupy our time; on it we die, and in it we shall all, at last, lie buried. It comes to that, finally. We acquiesce, in our modernity, and say: the contented man is the secular man; leave the Greeks to their immortal gods; ours is the simpler, surer, destiny of the dust.

For centuries we have been coming down from the mountain, we moderns of religious faith. Once, with Milton, we believed in divine revelation, actually and historically. We affirmed a providence in history; we confessed a Christian creed; we found in Christian doctrine an anchor against the storm; we delighted in theology as in a feast of thought. We had not yet had our reason distorted by the iron gods of relativism, pragmatism, behaviorism, nationalism, rationalism, collectivism and materialism. That, for many of us, was long ago. Yes, we have come down. Our fathers, still living up the mountain slope, sang their cherished hymns of piety. They upheld the altars of a traditional orthodoxy. But the new rationalism has all but overturned these altars.

How great and regrettable the change now is since Milton's day may be seen in the picture which the poet gives us, in *Paradise Lost*, of the insinuatingly evil character of Belial. Vile as he is in his role of Satan's cleverest henchman whose "tongue dropped manna" while he made "the worse appear the better reason," it did not occur to him to deny the absolute sovereignty of God; and his argument against assailing heaven contains a warning to his modern counterparts everywhere. Milton records that the sons of Belial, in his day, argued thus:

The towers of Heaven are filled
With arm'd watch, that render all access
Impregnable: . . . could we break our way . . .
With blackest insurrection, to confound
Heaven's purest light, yet our great enemy
All incorruptible would on his throne
Sit unpolluted, and the ethereal mould
Incapable of stain would soon expel
Her mischief, and purge off the baser fire,
Victorious. Thus repulsed, our final hope
Is flat despair.

They knew—these seventeenth century sons of Belial—that they could only "exasperate the Almighty Victor"; whereas their twentieth century successors have seemed to believe they could dethrone him. The princes of Satan, in Milton's day,

might vexatiously try to "interrupt heaven's joy" by tempting man to his fall from faith; but they prudently refrained from attempting to take the citadel of God by storm.

Milton's was a faith in a great deity. It was—even if tinged with Arianism—an essentially Christian faith; and we do well to know it intimately. It is a part of our cultural heritage. The Pilgrim Fathers possessed it and brought it to our shores; and we see its imprint on the New England landscape in the chaste dignity of her churches. It founded the Boston colony where, in due time, the patriarchal clan of Richard Mather, known as "Richard of the great voice," settled; where, in 1639, Increase Mather was born; and where later, from his citadel in the North Church, Boston, he ruled the fortunes of both the Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth colonies.

This theocratic culture of the early Puritans seems in our modern time to have rather too comfortably settled into an American cult of property; and it cannot be denied that some of the descendants of these pioneers have become wealthy through their close application to religion, to education, and to commerce. But the essential Puritan spirit is not simply one of frugality and sagacity, sanctioned by piety. It is a history-making spirit whose epic chapters are written across the land's map, on the farms and in the towns and cities, running like a continuous story from east to west, through New York, through Michigan, through Illinois and Iowa, through Kansas and Colorado, and onward to California. And today this spirit is, like Milton's voice, a protest against the tyranny of the godless state, against the corruption of character by any easy road to success, and against the vulgarity and the despair of a materialistic view of life.

Chapter 4

WORDSWORTH

On a late November night when the rain drives in from the west and the wood glows intensely on the hearth-fire, there is no better way to spend a quiet hour than to sit down with Wordsworth and to open his volume casually—in that mood in which the muses invite but do not force—and to read the poem called *Personal Talk*. There, in the household ways of plain people, the poet is at ease with you. The words come as naturally as leaves from trees, as he begins:

I am not One who much or oft delight
To season my fireside with personal talk,—
Of friends, who live within an easy walk, . . .
Better than such discourse doth silence long,
Long, barren silence, square with my desire; . . .
Children are blest, and powerful; their world lies
More justly balanced; partly at their feet,
And part far from them: . . .
Wings have we,—and as far as we can go
We may find pleasure: wilderness and wood, . . .
Dreams, books, are each a world; and books, we know,
Are a substantial world, both pure and good: . . .
There find I personal themes, a plenteous store,
Matter wherein right voluble I am,
To which I listen with a ready ear.

There, in words that have the intimate earthly touch, is Wordsworth: a country scene; a solitary cottage; a fireside with children; and good books. These fill the world for him. They, as he says, give him wings and tongue. Nature, the contemplative life, the innocence of a child, and the wisdom of mankind stored up in a volume of poems.—Where, except in some select academy of letters called a liberal arts college,

is the man who still loves these Wordsworthian things, knows them beyond all trite formulas, free of cant, and is willing, with the poet, to be "right voluble" about them?

This writer now remembers two people, a man and a woman, who once did these things. They were Midwestern farmers, emigrants from New England. With firm self-reliance, and using their savings, they built a house. The walls of one room were encased ladder-high with books. There they were later found, their years well spent, surrounded by their books as by immortal knights-in-arms. So encamped, they kept their bivouac together, gladdened by the hearth fire, until at last they closed their books and went away. Weeks later, the house again was alive with cheer. A daughter was living there, and little children played with toys before the fireplace. The good volumes, after an interval of silence, had resumed their watchful task in the new household.

Almost everyone, at some time, has felt the strange quiet power of a poem of Wordsworth. No willful effort is required to read it, no wide classical education, hardly any gift other than the reader's capacity to comprehend an idea of simple beauty. It insinuates itself, somehow, into the auditory channels of the soul and lodges there, a shy and delicate thing, like a household pet. Instinctively, we lay a caressing hand on it; we feel its live body, its heartbeat, its yielding, resisting strength. Then, suddenly, as at the opening of some door, it springs forth a living thing, an expression of our lives, an apparent utterance of our own, as in the words:

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise,
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
Half-hidden from the eye!
Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

Here is pure emotion, without alloy or dregs. Love, nature, simplicity, the rural touch, affection, and all that breathes of the soil, of the pure unsophisticated heart, is here represented. There is in this poem nothing unnatural; nor anything forcibly supernatural. There is no attempt at nicety, no resort to clever argument. Nothing stands between the heart and the word. The poem is pure feeling, without show of outward form. Yet the outward form is there, unobtrusive and firm as the subsoil in which the poet's thoughts have their deep root.

This is the simple, natural song by which Wordsworth is best known. It is poetry of the gentler natural passions, lightly touched with austerity, springing fresh from the earth, as in the mystery of the seed, its tender sprouting, and in the blade of grass waving gleefully in the sun. In the expression of this subtle passion for nature, Wordsworth has no equal among our poets. The humble flower, the sky, the landscape, are to him a reality by the side of which, momentarily, all else is inconsequential. He is nature's priest, worshipping God at beauty's shrine.

But we find on closer study that Wordsworth is not merely a poet of the physical world. Nature, he holds, is possessed of a soul. A spirit stirs in it, moving through all creaturely existence, and moving man to behold it, to perceive it, to stand in awe of it. Of this soul, or spirit, in nature three things can be said: first, that it is vital; second, that it is rational; third, that it is divine. A poet like Wordsworth, therefore, not only will feel nature compassionately, but comprehend it, and ground his faith in it. Nature will become an aid to religion with him, moving him to tenderness, instructing him in law and order, and directing him to God. It is for this reason that so delicate a poem as that in which the poet immortalizes Lucy gives way in popularity and weightiness to the little stanza:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began;
 So is it now I am a man;
 So be it when I shall grow old,
 Or let me die!
 The Child is father of the Man;
 And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety.

It is necessary, therefore, to remind ourselves that Wordsworth was not, in the ordinarily accepted sense, a nature-worshipper. He did not look on nature as the end, but only as the beginning, of the divine manifestation. To his maturer thought, after the days of childhood and of revolutionary youth had passed, religion meant much more than a response to nature's divine influence. It meant, as he wrote in the *Prelude*, faith in God as Eternal Spirit, and a life made rich by an experience of

Those gentlest visitations of pure thought
 When God, the Giver of all joy, is thank'd
 Religiously, in silent blessedness.

To the mature mind of Wordsworth—as to that of St. Paul—God was the One and All, in and above all things, blessed forever. Yet nature was full of manifestations of that divine influence which we particularly associate with the moral life. The poet always regarded nature as the soul of his moral being, saying, at one time, "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her," and at another,

One impulse from a vernal wood
 May teach you more of man,
 Of moral evil and of good,
 Than all the sages can.

Nature to Wordsworth was not God, but a voice of God, speaking in severity and gentleness, in truth, in honor, in love.

II

Two questions present themselves at this point of our study. They involve, first, Wordsworth's religious orthodoxy, and

second, his growth and experience as a poet. What was Wordsworth's religious faith? And how is what he believed reflected in his poetry? Let us look, first, at the poet's own record of himself and of his esthetic and religious experience. As we do so, we shall find, among other facts about him, (1) that he grew in his Christian faith while he matured in the mastery of his art; (2) that, contrary to much popular critical opinion, he did not abandon his early Christian beliefs, only to return to them after a period of apostasy and wandering; and (3) that neither the poet's nor the man's life was, after a few creative years, a long gradual surrender to reactionary ideas and enveloping decay.

What we actually note in following Wordsworth through his career from the composition of *Tintern Abbey* to that of the later *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* is the growth of the poet's mind, traceable on its religious side through three stages: first, a stress on outward sensation, on "natural piety"; second, an emphasis on spiritual or mystical vision; third, a progress in the higher discipline of Christian thought and moral virtue.

On the side of the poet's esthetic experience the progress, too, was gradual and natural: from a state of youthful ecstasy to one of mature serenity. If there were retrogressions, these were likewise natural. For there is in the life-stream of every man, as the poet Robert Frost tells us, a counter-current, a "backward motion toward the source, against the stream, . . . the tribute of the current to the source." But Wordsworth's later poetry as a whole, though smaller in quantity, as we should expect, does not suffer by a fair comparison with the earlier. In such a piece as *To A Skylark*, written in 1825, we find a quality of the poet's art which quite makes up in its serene beauty and firm texture of thought what it may lack in pure ecstasy,—as, for example, in the lines:

Leave to the nightingale her shady wood;
A privacy of glorious light is thine;
Whence thou dost pour upon the world a flood
Of harmony, with instinct more divine;
Type of the wise who soar, but never roam;
True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home!

The poem spans for us the thirty years of literary activity which are generally supposed to have been Wordsworth's richest: years of song, of pilgrimage to the sky; yet years of closest kinship to things terrestrial, to the skylark's instinct for its "nest upon the dewy ground." But should anyone think that Wordsworth wrote better poetry when he found himself wholly immersed in nature, or that his early poetry was free from the supposed chains of moral restraint, let him read the *Ode to Duty*, composed in 1805, and discover for himself the Dantean conception which Wordsworth had, even then, of that "eternal Love that moves the sun in heaven and all the stars," as he writes:

Flowers laugh before thee on their beds,
And fragrance in thy footing treads;
Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong;
And the most ancient heavens, through Thee,
are fresh and strong.

If—as some critics maintain—this is pantheism, Dante too was a pantheist. But if it is an expression of the doctrine of divine immanence, Wordsworth's orthodoxy is not brought into question. Why, we ask, should ideas repeatedly expressed in the book of Psalms, and there ascribed to God's immanence and found to be wholly reconcilable with His transcendence, be regarded as pantheism in passages of Wordsworth's *Prelude*? The answer appears to be mostly historical. And it is threefold: first, that we tend to lose sight of the fact of Wordsworth's orthodox Christian background; second, that we forget that there is in English literature a strong and persistent Platonist tradition; and, finally, as Dean Inge has said, we may perhaps be "doubtful whether anyone can be an orthodox theologian without being a Platonist."¹

This last important fact is probably best explained by going for illustration to the seventeenth century Jeremy Taylor's discourse on the Presence of God in his book *Holy Living*, where he says:

¹ See E. C. Batho, *The Later Wordsworth*, p. 240. Macmillan, 1933.

God is wholly in every present place; included in no place; not bound by cords except those of love; filling heaven and earth with His present power and with His never absent nature. . . . As the sun, reflecting upon the mud of strands and shores, is not polluted in its beams, so is God not dishonored when we suppose Him in every one of His creatures, and in every part of every one of them; and still is unmixed with any unhandsome adherence, as is the soul in the bowels of the body. . . . God is everywhere present by His power. He rolls the orbs of heaven with his hand. . . .

It is safe to say, with a recent writer on Wordsworth,² that there is at least an unconscious parallelism between Bishop Taylor's words and these in *Tintern Abbey*:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

If we now seek in the current of Wordsworth's Christian thought the esthetic and psychological data necessary to account for the literary and symbolical pattern of his poetry, we find three major elements. First, there appears to be an element of Hartleyan psychology,³ based on the theory of an association of ideas supposedly derived from simple sensations that act quite automatically on the passive mind; second, there would be a limited influence upon the poet of the eighteenth century emphasis on living in harmony with nature; and, finally, the "neo-Platonic thought of Nature and the soul as being a twin-birth." But in this analysis, what is significant to us and to our present study is not, after all, the origin of these conceptual

² Ibid, p. 245.

³ See "Wordsworth's Conception of the Esthetic Experience," by Oscar James Campbell in *Studies in Wordsworth and Coleridge*, E. L. Griggs, ed. Princeton Univ. Press, 1939.

patterns of the poet's thought, but their Christian use. That he made a definite Christian—and, we may say, apocalyptic or revelatory—use of them is very clear.

III

Wordsworth tells us in the *Prelude* that, in his childhood, nature was everywhere close upon him. He felt its presence as one haunted. It was not so much the flower or the brook that he saw,—the trees, or hills, or clouds. With a child's eyes, and even then the gift of a poet's imagination, he saw more than the ordinary objects of nature. The trees of the forest stood there before him like Druid priests, stately, awful, serene. It was their spirits, the divine powers in them, that moved the boy to mild and sweet obedience. Before these genial and awful spirits, whose altars were the somber hills of the Lake Country, he stood with bowed head, hearing their voices call to him: voices supernatural, divine admonishings, whose sovereignty he accepted in fearful, gentle willingness. Remembering the story of Jacob at Bethel, we cannot think it strange that the young Wordsworth then felt himself divinely visited and blest.

In a famous passage in the *Prelude*, Wordsworth tells us of the chastening influence of this sense of the divine presence during those early years; and he gives the story the setting of somber nature and the strength of his noble, simple style:

One summer evening . . . I found
A little boat tied to a willow tree
Within a rocky cove, its usual home.
Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in
Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on; . . .

I fixed my view
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge, . . .
When, from behind that craggy steep till then
The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. . . .
And growing still in stature the grim shape

Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the covert of the willow tree;

. . . but after I had seen

That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; . . . No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colors of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

This aliveness of nature filled him with joy, a deep strange joy, mingled with fear. The humblest flower was as if touched by the Creator's hand; every blade of grass witnessed to the presence of God. The seasons were to him a divine miracle. Angelic spirits presided over nature, holding high festival in the heavens, singing in the trees, smiling in the quiet water, or frowning disapproval in the dark cloud and uttering judgment in the storm.

Nature obviously was not then simply a refuge to Wordsworth, a means of escape from discomfort, from life's reality. Nature was his parent, his home, his boyhood's source of sustenance. He did not go to it simply to be idly entertained. He lived in the Lake Country; he went to school at Hawkshead, on Esthwaite Water; the region belonged to him, and he to it. Its life was in him, its solitude, its silence, its gentle influence, and its uncontrollable passion. Again and again, in the *Prelude* and the *Excursion*, he records as a poet the life he felt in him as a boy. It was not a mere physical existence that he lived then, but a life of close and testing companionship in solitude with nature; and in this companionship he worshipped, as he says,

The Being that is in the clouds and air,
That is in the green leaves among the groves.

In his eighteenth year Wordsworth entered Cambridge University. The four years he spent there were a time of awakening and of great joy to him. He read, made friends, and studied poetry and philosophy. But he did not break with the past, that "fair seed-time of his soul" in which, as he said, he grew up "fostered alike by beauty and by fear." His boyhood, he liked to think, was treasured up with the flowers of the yesterdays in his memory forever. He later wrote of those maturing years with a most pleasurable recollection, lively imagination, and tranquil spirit,—as he did, for instance, on a certain day at Grasmere when he saw the daffodils growing on the margin of Ullswater in the month of March, "nodding their golden heads beside the dancing and foaming waves."

But the intervening years did effect a change in him. They took along with them his childhood's sensations. The youth who was one day to be the poet had become inwardly aware of his own *apartness* from nature, and yet of his profound *oneness* with it. He had become conscious, particularly, of the imagination's power over nature, and of the soul's union with God. In the afterglow of youth, after the years of storm and stress perhaps had ended, at the age of twenty-nine, Wordsworth wrote in the *Prelude*:

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought,
That givest to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion, not in vain
By day or star-light thus from my first dawn
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
The passions that build up our human soul.

Reading these lines, we think it strange that this poet of religious faith should ever simply be called a nature-poet. Nature is here seen to be to Wordsworth altogether a manifestation of God. The poet's mind is on man's union with nature, and on man's and nature's communion with God. The great bond of unity is the poet's belief in the vast divine intercommunion of all things,—a sphere of unity in which God is the ineffable center, and in which man's participation with

nature in the being of God is expressed in a life of deep quietude and untroubled joy. So to live with nature is to live at peace, to share the deep calm at the heart of nature, the stillness of the night, the restfulness of the hills, the tranquillity of the evening sun and of the stars. And though there are storms and floods, which are the signs of nature moved by passion, there is

Central peace subsisting at the heart
Of endless agitation,—

and this central peace, writes Stopford Brooke in his volume, *Theology in the English Poets*, “was not self-born in Nature; it was in Wordsworth’s thought the ineffable calm of God’s existence which spoke to us and redeemed us.”

No poem better sums up “this the loveliest of all ideas which Wordsworth introduced into English poetry,” than the poem *Tintern Abbey*. In these lines composed, as the poet says, one day in July in 1798, on the banks of the river Wye, he writes :

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye;
But oft, in lonely rooms, and ’mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration: . . . Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened—that serene and blessed mood
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul;
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

Here sensation passes into deeper feeling, and feeling into vision; the poet's ecstasy and serenity are one; the revelation of the Eternal Spirit through its incarnation in "beauteous forms" is complete. Wordsworth's representation of religious thought through mystical experience has gone as far as it can go. Beyond it, for the poet, lies silent adoration,—and the apocalypse of divine history, in which he believes himself to have a part, the part of one, as he himself says, who is to be, "else sinning greatly, a dedicated Spirit."

Aware that

The Poet, gentle creature as he is,
Hath, like the Lover, his unruly times,

Wordsworth turned toward the world in which he lived,—which, in fact, he had never forsaken: the world of men and nations. Human society, the destiny of mankind, and the working of Providence through nature on the mind and welfare of man, interested him throughout life. His maturing Christian orthodoxy was as natural an experience in him as his growth in communion with nature. As nature never failed him, so faith did not. Faith in freedom and faith in God were alike nourished by those high thoughts of nature which "give to Poets, now by thought matured, their summer strength." So Wordsworth, in the *Prelude*, links the Alps to freedom, and calls on the "giant woods on Etna" to restore liberty to France, and to give peace to the world through the divine immanence which the poet associates with his conception of love,—

. . . love that breathes not without awe;
Love that adores, but on the knees of prayer,
By heaven inspired; that frees from chains the soul,
Lifted, in union with the purest, best,
Of earth-born passions, on the wings of praise
Bearing a tribute to the Almighty's Throne.

IV

The order of nature, says Wordsworth, is not the ground of the Christian view of life. Christianity is not a natural, but a revealed religion. We must look from nature rather than to it

for the fulfillment of our hope. Nature, we may grant, helps us to establish ourselves here, to find our "natural" environment, to know where we are on this human island in the sea of existence. But nature does not tell us essentially *what* we are. As earthly creatures we may consent to say that we much resemble the dog, or the beaver, or the tree: we dig and hunt, we build homes and watch over our young; or we obey the seasons and spread out our branches, we wither with age and die. Yet within us there is the unanswered cry, the hunger of the heart, the refusal to accept nature's way. This hunger is universal in our kind. It characterizes us.

Man in an environment of nature and man as a natural creature, Wordsworth knew, were two different beings. For a time, under the influence of the teachings of Hartley and Hobbes, the two concepts were in conflict within him. The year 1793, particularly, was one of great struggle for the young poet. He felt himself betrayed by his own ideals, by his faith in man and God. Age-old beliefs seemed to lie in ruins everywhere around him. Nothing stood, or seemed to stand, against the hard assault of reason. Everything, closely examined, fell apart and crumbled under the impact of a materialistic logic, as a noble building, even a great church, may be seen to crumble under the shock of an earthquake. Of this crisis in his life, Wordsworth later wrote:

Dragging all precepts, judgments, maxims, creeds,
Like culprits to the bar; . . . demanding formal *proof*,
And, seeking it in everything, I lost
All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,
Sick, wearied out with contrarieties,
Yielded up moral questions in despair.

But the storm between the years 1791 and 1796 passed away for him, and there followed a second spring. His faith was restored—his faith in God and man. It is worth noting that it was his sister Dorothy who led him onward through trust and love to a firm belief in a divine Providence. Through her, chiefly, he came to realize that his skepticism had been a symptom of morbidity. Unbelief, he came to understand, was an

ominous sign of the soul's inner disturbance, a cloud in the mind, a sick man's thought. It was not some passing doubt, merely, that had concerned him here. Doubt, he well knew, was an acute illness, painful and bewildering. But unbelief was a chronic disease. In its grip, men died the death of the spirit, with grotesque wide open eyes.

It was, Wordsworth tells us, only when he had achieved this higher state of faith in God and man that his soul rested from anguish—and that he became the poet. That was between the years 1795 and 1797. His sister Dorothy, we have said, had offered him her understanding, healing counsel; and Coleridge, richly gifted in theological insight, gave him valued guidance. So led, Wordsworth grew in the knowledge of faith until, in the last book of the *Prelude*, he could write:

. . . I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, . . . a mind sustained
By recognitions of transcendent power, . . .
Such minds are truly from the Deity,
For they are Powers: and hence the highest bliss
That flesh can know is theirs—the consciousness
Of Whom they are, habitually infused
Through every image and through every thought,
And all affections by communion raised
From earth to heaven, from human to divine; . . .
Hence, amid ills that vex, and wrongs that crush
Our hearts—if here the words of Holy Writ
May with fit reverence be applied—that peace
Which passeth understanding.

By 1800, Wordsworth, then thirty and with his faith restored, was turning anew to the world about him with the two-fold question: What is man's place in the society of men; and what is to be said of his origin and destiny? The answers he gave were summed up by him in two great odes: the *Ode to Duty*, and *Intimations of Immortality*. In both poems, as well as in the *Excursion*, written between 1802 and 1814, the note of Christian faith is strong and sure. We are not to assume in them any return to the Anglican Church which Wordsworth had never deserted, but only a growing reassurance that the

religious experience of his early youth had been founded on the solid rock of truth. And the years thereafter were not barren years. Rather they were years of inward growth for the poet, during which his mind "transcended the objects brought into it by sensation,"⁴ and sought—in such a poem, for instance, as *The White Doe of Rylstone*—the assurance "of an eternal principle which quietly dominates all that is temporary and transitory." Fundamentally, in these later years it was the problem of mutability, of the impermanence and transitoriness of all things in nature, that was uppermost in the poet's thought. It took the form of a dissatisfaction with naturalism, and expressed itself in

The universal instinct of repose,
The longing for confirmed tranquillity,

that is the theme of *The Excursion*: and it became the central theme, in 1820, of the series of sonnets, *The River Duddon*, in which he saw his own life symbolized in a river, cloud-born, tumultuous at its source, advancing through vicissitudes, broadening into tranquillity and, at last,

Prepared, in peace of heart, in calm of mind,
And soul, to mingle with Eternity.

In the years 1821 and 1822 Wordsworth wrote a long and notable chain of *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* in which he not only sought to bring his poetry into harmony with his faith and put it to Christian use, but desired—this time in an historical-symbolical manner—to picture the Christian Church as a Holy River flowing through the long centuries of Time "without being defiled by Time's decay." Near the end of the sequence, and noted for its architectonic style, is the sonnet on *Mutability* in which the poet says:

From low to high doth dissolution climb,
And sink from high to low, along a scale
Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail; . . .
Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear

⁴ See Oscar James Campbell, *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, Princeton University Press, 1939.

The longest date . . . drop like the tower sublime
 Of yesterday, which . . . could not even sustain
 Some casual shout that broke the silent air,
 Or the unimaginable touch of Time.

But while Wordsworth was giving to these transitory impressions and objects of nature a higher meaning as "the types and symbols of Eternity," he did not close his eyes to the actual world. That he looked realistically on life, and saw evil in conflict with good, is noticeable in the sonnet he wrote in London, in 1802, saying,

Milton! thou shouldest be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters;—

and again in the following lines, written when, as he said, he was struck by the vanity and pride of his own country:

Rapine, avarice, expense,—
 This is idolatry; and these we adore:
 Plain living and high thinking are no more:
 The homely beauty of the good old cause
 Is gone; our peace, our fearful innocence,
 And pure religion breathing household laws.

If this sonnet sounds conservative, and like old age in Wordsworth, it should be noted that it was composed in the very year that he was writing the inimitable verses on the daisy and the celandine,—when the poet was thirty-two; and, in marking the change that the years wrought in him, it will be well to remember that, at sixty-eight, his touch was light and his heart unchanged, as he wrote in *A May Morning: 1838*,

Life with yon Lambs, like day, is just begun,
 Yet Nature seems to them a heavenly guide. . . .
 Why to God's goodness cannot We be true,
 And so, His gifts and promises between,
 Feed to the last on pleasures ever new?

Wordsworth's lifelong solicitude, through which he looks on the social community and the moral life and, with one bold

stroke of thought, brings the entire picture into subjection to the pattern of religion, has in it a suggestion of the genius of Saint Paul. Like the great apostle, Wordsworth refuses to separate social problems from private virtues, or either of them from religion. He does not confuse the moral problem with the problem of faith. He knows that the good life reflects the godly life, as the moon reflects the sun. He is aware that the virtuous man submits to the moral law which the Christian has come to love. Of duty which, rightly defined, is more than a natural obedience, which is, in truth, the assumption of a life of virtue under God, Wordsworth is moved to say, in the *Ode*:

. . . thou dost wear
The Godhead's most benignant grace;
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face:
. . . I myself commend
Unto thy guidance from this hour; . . .
Give unto me, made lowly wise,
The spirit of self-sacrifice;
The confidence of reason give;
And in the light of truth thy Bondman let me live.

Finally, Wordsworth's message to us goes beyond nature and this temporal world. He speaks to the soul as to the eternal pilgrim in us. Nature at last will have done its work, history's task will be accomplished, time will end. But a greater fulfillment awaits us. Wordsworth believes that our destiny is in heaven. We carry with us, even in our bodies, the divine gift of immortality. This knowledge of our eternal heritage is ours not only through intuition but through divine revelation. It is a gift of God. Our inkling of it, as the poet tells us in the *Ode to Immortality*, is the implanted seed of our divine origin; and if of our origin, then also of our destiny. In youth, especially, when the conscience in us surrounds our reason as the tender membrane surrounds the brain, we often awaken from some dream, to say: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not." Wherever we go, we carry with us both an earthly house and a heavenly one. Our earthly house we see dissolved before

our melancholy eyes. Our Bethels endure. Wordsworth knew this, with a poet's knowledge, and he could therefore say, in the *Ode*,

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That Nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive! . . .
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength . . .
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

The forward look of Wordsworth's faith is attractively shown in the poem *Stepping Westward* which the poet wrote while he remembered a certain "fine evening after sunset" when his sister Dorothy and he had been walking by the side of Loch Katrine, "in one of the loneliest parts of that solitary region," where they met two women also walking together, one of whom, greeting them, said somewhat wistfully: "What, you are stepping westward?" Wordsworth wrote,—perceiving that the words would not leave him,

I liked the greeting; 'twas a sound
Of something without place or bound;
And seemed to give me spiritual right
To travel through that region bright.

The earth is a good place to be—most of the time. In the fresh garment of spring, nature is a joy. To finger the tender blades of grass by the wayside and to know an hour's forgetfulness from pain is ample reward for our being here. But the hour passes, the day drives us on, and we face the inevitability of the night. At best, we are travelers through life. In sudden crises, driven relentlessly, we are in fear and confusion. It is then that we must be certain of our heavenly destiny.

And it is good, in such a time, to hear the voice of a fellow-traveler, the strong salutation of a man of faith, of a poet like Wordsworth. For in a poet so endowed with insight, so naturally one of us in his broad commonality, yet so gifted with power to express our profoundest feelings and our highest

hopes, we may find—if there is healing in high thoughts of nature, man, and God—a solace against too great care about earthly goods or gods, a tranquil mind made free and so at rest. Whoever reads Wordsworth, by good habit and with something of the tender attention which is due him, will find in him, soon or late, a strong friend, a shelter against hard care and bitter unbelief, a cause for keeping faith with man and mankind, and a sure stay and consolation against the ruthless drive of time. Blest, indeed, is he who can share with the poet

Those gentlest visitations of pure thought
When God, the Giver of all joy, is thank'd
Religiously, in silent blessedness.

Chapter 5

TENNYSON

A gifted lecturer of a generation ago told this little story:¹

Two sailors stood on the deck of their ship and looked at a sail on the sea. One said: "It looks small and far away." The other said: "It looks large and near at hand." Both were right; for one looked through the big end of the spy-glass, and the other looked through the little end.

These sailors typify two ages; and they illustrate two viewpoints by which men look on the world. The primitive believing man, whom Thomas Carlyle once called the *original* man, saw God immediately present in all things. The modern man by this definition is more skeptical, more puzzled, and less original. He looks for, and records where he finds them, the signs of the working of Providence in the "far-off divine event toward which the whole creation moves."

Well representing his own time, the poet Tennyson undertook to reconcile these two diverse attitudes. Looking into his own soul with intense mystical insight, he saw the great hope which we associate with the kingdom of God as fully realized. Heaven seemed near and, through the eyes of Galahad, the poet was given ecstatic glimpses of

The spiritual city and all her spires,
And gateways in a glory like one pearl.

But looking out on the world, closely observing the order of nature, its apparent disregard of man's dreams and the hard facts of a physical universe, he found himself compelled to take a far-off view, subduing his strong feeling of impatience with an order in which all things seemed out of joint, and science

¹ John P. D. John, *The Worth of a Man*, p. 108.

moved but "slowly, creeping on from point to point," even while, with the youth in *Locksley Hall*, he was daring to say:

Yet I doubt not through the ages one
increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widened
with the process of the suns.

These opposite views clearly indicate to us the two major aspects of Tennyson's religious thought. And it is around them that the great body of his poetry seems to gather—as if in concentric spheres around opposite poles. Yet there is between them some strong invisible and unsevered bond of union which makes these two attitudes—the mystical and the scientific—rather the axes of his faith than simply conflicting forces in what has been called by the poet himself the war of Soul with Sense.

I

Tennyson was not a primitivist. He did not envy the cave man's lot. He believed in civilization, in a future and better society. But he held to the one important truth in the religion of primitive man: the acceptance of life as a divine mystery. And he believed, with good cause, that a mystery is not, in any age, a hindrance to faith. Looking on nature through the eyes of a poet in an age of science, he read there the question which all of us ask, and wrote down our faith's answer to it in this short poem:

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand
Little flower—but *if* I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

As in nature, so also in history—faith is the answer to man's questionings. Against change and decay, time's ruthlessness and futility, and nature's endless chain of necessity and causation, he declares his faith in God. It is not possible, says Tennyson, nor necessary, to deny the natural facts of causation and

change. They are too real to be ignored. All things in nature undergo nature's change, its imperturbable law. It is so designed for nature by the divine plan. Similarly, in the order of history, nations rise and fall, dynasties come and go, yet forever as under divine control, just as nature, too, is under divine command. Progress, therefore, is not a merely natural phenomenon; it is providential; and the history of man is not simply the record of a natural evolution, but also of a divine revelation. Evolution seems, in fact, to be the process; but the plan is divine. It is this plan, this divine purpose active in human events, and not simply produced by the events, of which Tennyson is thinking when, in *Locksley Hall*, he writes:

When I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;

Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight, dropping down with costly bales;

Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rained a ghastly
dew

From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue;

Far along the world-wide whisper of the south-wind rushing
warm,

With the standards of the peoples plunging thro' the thunder-
storm;

Till the war-drum throbb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were
furl'd,

In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.

It is a strange picture that the young poet lets us see through his eyes. The vision he has had is prophetic. He himself tells us that his spirit leapt within him at the sight, that it was a far-off vision, and that it left him weary, with a "palsied heart." The outlook, we observe, is both dark and bright. In one penetrating glance at the world, he sees its wonder, and its terror: "argosies of magic sails"; and the rain of "ghastly dew." Both good and evil are a reality to him. Nature and history present themselves to him as they are, namely, areas of conflict between the forces of good and evil. It is not a picture of the "natural"

eradication of evil, or of the "natural" unfolding of history, that he sees. It is one of antithesis. Tennyson can see no easy solution, for instance, to the problem of war and peace, or of making the world a happy place in which to live. He says, very hopefully, that through the use of common sense and international law the natural desires and impulses of nations and men may be held in check and in awe, and so in a natural state of equilibrium. But that is as far as nature can go. Tennyson pauses (in line 130 of the poem) when he says this. Then adds: "So I triumphed. . ." But the mood of bewilderment which holds him drives him onward. He knows he has not found the solution; and the passion of hope that swept through him has left his spirit dry, and, as he concludes,

Left me with the palsied heart,
and left me with the jaundiced eye.

What becomes of all man's knowledge if he trusts in nature alone? Tennyson asks, and wonders. The answer for nature alone, or for science, is not a consoling one. Instead of consolation, it fills the poet's mind with a picture of strange dread as he writes:

Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers, . . .

Science moves, but slowly, slowly, . . .

Slowly comes a hungry people, as a lion, creeping nigher,

Glares at one that nods and winks behind a slowly-dying fire.

Will science win over a hungry people in this slow race? Tennyson asked this question in *Locksley Hall* one hundred years ago. It is impossible to avoid the inquiry: how much nearer to the answer has the century brought us? It is true that it has brought us the advance of science. Yet men go hungry, and tyranny still threatens the lesser and humbler peoples of the world. In its procession, as if on parade down a city street, the great juggernaut of modern progress has come to the intersection of the world's history where we now live. Impressively, it passes before us and we stand in awe at the vast machinery we see. We admit ourselves thrilled, and perhaps "improved." But deep within ourselves, and in the world of

men and of nations in which we live, we discover a helpless misery. The century of progress, we ruefully say, has come and gone, and still men cry out for deliverance. Some indeed are helped; infants and children are kept alive; and the aged are made a little less uncomfortable. But, after the recent passing of the awful juggernaut of war, we repeat the questioning of Tennyson's heart, who will empty the hospitals of our mentally diseased and of those maimed beyond endurance in the modern institution called a "scientific" war?

Yet Tennyson frankly accepted the evidence of science. It represented, he said, the hard facts about nature. In the poem *Maud*, in which all of life is seen as through the eyes of one who is half demented by what he sees, the stars look on him with

Pitiless, passionless eyes,
Cold fires, yet with power to burn and brand
His nothingness into man.

And in the poem *Parnassus* he pictures himself drinking from the fountain of the Muses when suddenly two dreadful shapes are imaged there before him; and he names them almost in Dantean style, saying, "These are Astronomy and Geology, terrible Muses!"

Tennyson was fascinated by science, even while he feared it. Its ruthless orderliness charmed him, cast a spell on his imagination, from which a pure vision of truth alone was able to release him. Thus, alternately bound by reason to science, and by vision to faith, he wrote most of his poetry in that mood of tension between reason and revelation which, we observe, is characteristic of modern man. But being a poet and not a scientist, Tennyson gave the impetus of his genius to his vision, dedicating his ornate and disciplined art to the high cause of faith. It was in this mood, with his sail set to the outgoing wind, blowing seaward from time's shores toward eternity, that the poet was at his best. Like Robert Browning, his contemporary, he knew how to

Welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,—

but with this difference, that Tennyson was a very cautious mariner who followed his life's star carefully, period by period, as he later wrote of it in *Merlin And The Gleam*: (1) through melodious early summer days too soon darkened by adverse criticism; (2) on youthful wings of fancy, by the "silent river" and the "silvery willow"; (3) from the palace of King Arthur, and past "the golden crosses of the churches"; (4) to the Valley of the Shadow in *In Memoriam*—until he could say to others, especially to those in whom faith was yet to triumph over doubt,

Not of the sunlight,
Not of the moonlight,
Not of the starlight!
O young Mariner,
Down to the haven,
Call your companions,
Launch your vessel,
And crowd your canvas,
And, ere it vanishes
Over the margin,
After it, follow it,
Follow The Gleam.

It is evident there was in Tennyson's nature a strong strain of antithesis. It was noticeable, for example, in the shy taciturnity of a man who was actually a deeply sympathetic humanitarian. He shut himself in at Farringford and Aldworth when his real hunger was to know the thoughts and hearts of men. Long silences at his own fireside in the presence of Thomas Carlyle pleased him as much as his exuberant recitation of *Maud* to an appreciative visitor.

His earliest poems show his attempt at resolving the existing tension between raw nature and human taste, between disillusionment and the ideal, between the active and the contemplative life, estheticism and social reform, classicism and romance. And he wished always to bring these qualities of dissonance into harmony through his art. In this sense, too, he often found his art at variance with his thought; and it is possible to see how his art came, in time, to symbolize to him the ideal of peace and perfection in which life's discordant elements could

be fully summed up. This strong tendency is well illustrated in *Claribel*, one of Tennyson's earliest poems, surnamed "A Melody," in which "the king's fair daughter" of Shakespeare's *Tempest* is pictured in dreamless sleep while nature above her records the pain of life, in these words :

Where Claribel low-lieth
 The breezes pause and die,
 Letting the rose-leaves fall :
 But the solemn oak-tree sigheth,
 Thick-leaved, ambrosial,
 With an ancient melody
 Of an inward agony,
 Where Claribel low-lieth.

The antithesis between romance and realism is vividly set forth in the poem *The Lady of Shalott*. Here the world as the poet dreams it to be is so strikingly contrasted with the world as it actually is that he has the Lady say, "The curse is come upon me," when her "new-born love for something, for some one in the wide world" is indifferently received, and her death for love earns but a knight's belated casual comment :

"She has a lovely face;
 God in his mercy lend her grace,
 The Lady of Shalott."

The contrast between the two famous poems, *The Lotos-Eaters* and *Ulysses*, further accentuates the point. It matters less, for the moment, that the stories in them are taken from Homer's *Odyssey*; or that the classical diction and restraint of the poems is quite without parallel elsewhere in the writings of Tennyson; or that their philosophical background is boldly pagan. The antithesis we see and feel as we read the poems is striking; and to its pattern of contrast the poet offers the full use of his art. Two conceptions of life meet in them. One is expressed in the words :

Let what is broken so remain.
 The Gods are hard to reconcile.

The other is contained in the lines :

Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
 Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.

But it is in the larger conflict between faith and doubt that we find the true religious significance of Tennyson's poetry. Here the issues are clearly presented to the poet. We have already said that he accepted modern science, but could not fully trust it; and that he professed the Christian faith, though he could not fully comprehend it. Like the modern man whom he typifies, he was aware of the obvious fact of natural law. Like the true English poet of Christian tradition, he was even more certain of truths which transcended nature and were made comprehensible to him in a mystery. His thought was thus divided, though his heart was one, beating in unison, though in sorrow, with the bells of the third Christmas in *In Memoriam*, whose closing note is on "The Christ that is to be." The poem *In Memoriam* is the poet's monument to his victory of faith over doubt. It establishes him as a definitely Christian poet. There is perhaps nothing better, or more modern, in our entire literature than the rational-mystical argument of this poem in behalf of the soul assailed by religious doubt in the midst of sorrow to the point of despair, only to rise, through love, to a joyous rebirth of faith. That is the poem's story.

But, as a prelude to it, we should first read *The Two Voices*, written in 1833, during the period of Tennyson's bewildered grief over Arthur Hallam's death, when the poet's panic-stricken spirit brooded heavily on faith and doubt.² In the ensuing argument one voice, expressing doubt that man is anything more than a worm, a creature steeped in the misery of his mind, declares:

Cease to wail and brawl!
Why inch by inch to darkness crawl?
There is one remedy for all.

But the poet, aware of another and divine voice within him, answers:

Who forged that other influence,
That heat of inward evidence,
By which he doubts against the sense?

² See in this connection Harold Nicolson's volume *Tennyson*, pp. 125-130.

The tempter's retort is quick and hard, and Tennyson adds:

The still voice laugh'd. "I talk," said he,
 "Not with thy dreams. Suffice it thee
 Thy pain is a reality."

In due time, the voice of hope speaks to the poet. It comes to him, he says, in

A little whisper silver-clear,
 A murmur, "Be of better cheer."

After that, the poet wanders forth into the world surrounded by a heavenly chorus of the words, "Rejoice! Rejoice!"

II

Tennyson tells us in his *Memoir* that *In Memoriam* is "not an actual biography," but a poem of moods in which fear, doubt, and suffering "find answer . . . through Faith in a God of Love." The poem is Christian to the core. It opens on a note suggestive of the Fourth Gospel. And it moves about its theme, centering in the Prologue, like some mountain bird flying in concentric circles about its nest, ascending higher and higher until it rests at last in brooding peace on the promised word of God. In its composition it is a collection of elegies written, as Tennyson himself said, at different times and places, as memory awakened their thoughts in him. The date of Tennyson's grief over Hallam's death went back to 1833; the complete poem was published in 1850; and the 131 sections that comprise it were composed between these years.

Faith in God, we have noted, is the poem's foundation. Belief in divine love and in the soul's immortality are its two theological pillars. Its keystone is Christ, His person and His teaching. The poem is designed to fall into larger sections marked by the events of Christmas and Easter. Around them, as ivies around two marble columns, the stanzas grow in intertwining tenderness and grace. Nothing Tennyson has written springs so directly from within him, from his deepest feelings, his mature art, his grasp of life's meaning, its certain and sweet nearness to death, the mystic wonder of death, its calm fulfil-

ment of our earthly striving, and the great story of a loss that passes into love and at last into eternal life.

The entire piece is a major work of art. Mood and meter unite masterfully in expressing the poet's thought, in emptying by degrees the rich deposit of his mind. The stanza form, with its interior riming lines, holds the slowly outpouring thought in check, giving to the entire poem at once a steadily searching and a deeply calming effect. Structurally, too, the poem is sound and strong. Behind it lies a deep personal sorrow; its motive or argument is the conquest of this human sorrow; and its purpose unfolds as this personal sorrow widens into universal grief.

Death and grief are the initial theme of *In Memoriam*. But the poem does not rest in a contemplation of them. Something else is added. It is the struggle through doubt to faith; and, beyond these, of love rising triumphant through sorrow to joy. The poem, in brief, passes through four stages: (1) from personal grief to universal sorrow; (2) from sorrow to resignation; (3) from resignation to faith; (4) from faith to peace and joy. These represent the poet's experience and the poem's plan. It is the great Christian argument—the assertion that, to the man of faith, sorrow is not the end. It is by divine plan the means to the end. At its root, that is the Christian gospel: death and grief overcome, and the world's sorrow turned into joy. It was Isaiah's message; it was St. Paul's; it was Dante's in the *Divine Comedy*. And Tennyson, in his *Memoir*, himself said that the poem "was meant to be a kind of *Divina Comedia*, ending with happiness . . . through Faith in a God of Love."

The poem justifies Henry Van Dyke's estimate of it as "the greatest elegy of the nineteenth century, the longest and most important of Tennyson's poems on the problems of doubt and faith, the poem in which he made the strongest and widest impression on contemporary thought." It contains, so to speak, the soul of Tennyson. Something very rich lay behind its composition, as Stopford Brooke has said: "His boyhood, his youth, his early loves, his pleasures at the university, his classical studies, the charm of the Greek stories; his first delight in the

romantic tale such as that of Arthur, his vacation rambles and the discussions which made them vivid; the light fancies of youth, the happy pity of sad stories; the loveliness of nature round his home, and in the wilder places of the mountain and the glen; the daily life of country folk, seen through the emotions of youthful love."

But it was not of these personal things that he now wrote, though they had been the means of pollination to his imaginative fancy. Here, by comparison, was something strong and immense, not now welling up within him, but pouring in from the outer world upon him. It was, as Mr. Brooke has said, "the great trouble of mankind flowing in with a full tide," emptying itself on the poet's void soul. That is the first realized feeling expressed in the poem: the universal grief that inundates the heart and almost silences forever the poet's voice. Tennyson—note the symbolism of the river, hushed at its mouth, trying to talk to the inundating sea—writes, in section XIX:

The Danube to the Severn gave
The darkened heart that beat no more;
They laid him by the pleasant shore,
And in the hearing of the wave.

There twice a day the Severn fills;
The salt sea-water passes by,
And hushes half the babbling Wye,
And makes a silence in the hills.

The Wye is hushed nor moved along,
And hushed my deepest grief of all,
When filled with tears that cannot fall,
I brim with sorrow drowning song.

The tide flows down, the wave again
Is vocal in its wooded walls;
My deeper anguish also falls,
And I can speak a little then.

It is as an outlet for grief that such poetry is born; not the tearful grief of one lonely heart, but the voice of the world's sorrow that runs in like a tide upon the soul. We have all heard its sound, the sound of deep water moving in upon the

shores of our isled humanity. What of the dead who speak to us, in the disquieting stillness, without any sound of their long-familiar voices? Where does the cycle of existence begin, but with birth; and where, but with death, does it end? How strong, actually, against this physical fact is the claim of the soul that life begins and ends with God? Is it not almost perverse to sound out faith's assertion in the midst of tombs and yews in a churchyard? These are the questions we ask. Tennyson asked them in the midst of the change of days and seasons and waited for the answers, while the stillness brooded over him and the silence would not speak:

Old yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the underlying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head;
Thy roots are wrapped about the bones.

The seasons bring the flower again,
And bring the firstling to the flock;
And in the dusk of thee, the clock
Beats out the little lives of men.

The spring ripens into summer. The firstlings of the flock grow and graze in the fields. The trees, now less lush, stand silent in the August sun. September follows in a rich and yellow stillness; and, still and brooding, Tennyson writes:

Calm is the morn without a sound,
Calm as to suit a calmer grief,
And only through the faded leaf
The chestnut pattering to the ground: . . .

Calm and deep peace in this wide air,
These leaves that redden to the fall;
And in my heart, if calm at all,
If any calm, a calm despair.

But what comes of this brooding, say the worldly wise? Sorrow, they say, is a fact. The man who has work to do faces grief and forgets it. He does something more than celebrate death with the haunting lute of the poet's verse. But can sorrow be forgotten in a vain striving after a glory that leads

but to the grave? Tennyson lets the critics speak, as Job did the false comforters:

This fellow would make weakness weak,
And melt the waxen hearts of men . . .
Let him be;
He loves to make parade of pain . . .

The plain and salutary fact is that the heart is human. God made it so, we say gratefully, against the false ruthlessness of the Nietzscheans and the Marxians; and, certainly, it is contrary to nature to deny a sorrow that is real, or to wish oneself less than human in order to escape the pain that is an essential part of all our earthly joy. It is a denial of the divine Spirit to content ourselves to be wholly a portion of the brute and the clod. Tennyson ends the argument of his answer-ready critics with the immortal lines:

I hold it true whate'er befall;
I feel it, when I sorrow most;
'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.

But the words which end this section of the poem are not the poet's whole thought. A greater voice is speaking in the evening air. He hears it in the Christmas bells that sing from the four surrounding villages, and, as he listens, he understands them answering to each other in the mist that lies between the hills:

Each voice four changes on the wind,
That now dilate, and now decrease,
Peace and goodwill, goodwill and peace,
Peace and goodwill, to all mankind.

Man is not alone in his sorrow. God is there in the Valley of the Shadow with him. And death is not the last sad word in a land where the birth of Christ is proclaimed. The mortal end and the immortal beginning are one, for Christ is now truly the Alpha and the Omega of our essential being.

To this birth of hope, announced early in the poem, Tenny-

son now adds his faith in immortality. Here, too, the poet's view rests on Gospel ground. In section xxxi, for instance, he tells the story of Lazarus. It is the story of death in Mary's house, of Martha's anguish, of Jesus' tears. There, at the sacred place of Lazarus' tomb, the poet, following the evangelist, withdraws from the center of the scene, as Moses and Elias withdrew from the Mount of Transfiguration, leaving to us only the contemplation of the vision of Christ. Have we not ourselves stood, so held in rapt suspense between life and death, at the freshly filled grave of one whom we held most dear? We have known it all: the emptiness and the assurance; love's reality revealed in both the having and the losing; faith struggling to follow where love leads; the grave, at last, believed to be no barrier, no dark place—the grave where the love we know and the faith we declare stand side by side. And, so standing there by the side of our close kindred, no longer lamenting but loving and believing, we have seen through our tears with Mary and Martha, and through the tears of Jesus, the truth of the words Christ said: "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

But even if love, stronger than death, undergirds faith, still there are the mind's honest questionings. Trust, Tennyson holds, does not preclude doubt; nor does doubt prevent trust. In this earthly life they exist together, no more separable from one another than are our natural good health and our mortality. In the midst of life we are in death; in the midst of joy we are in fear; in the midst of faith we are in doubt. Here, on earth, we walk by faith and not by sight. There are two reasons why we do so: one is that we cannot endure the full light of truth; the other is that this world is a place of shadows. Man must know to have faith. Yet his knowledge makes him skeptical; and by his increase of skepticism he destroys his hope of complete knowledge. The result, as Tennyson sees it, is mankind's increase in science, accompanied by an increase in man's natural helplessness. In his helplessness he can only hope and dream and trust

that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill; . . .

That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete.

That is Tennyson's dream. Yet, because it is only one half of the picture that he sees, it does not now leave him satisfied, or serene, or strong. This fond hope is but a man's dream, a poet's vision attended by a child's fear. Section LIV of *In Memoriam* ends with a lamentation:

So runs my dream; but what am I?
An infant crying in the night;
An infant crying for the light;
And with no language but a cry.

But this further truth can be affirmed: that in the struggle for faith, and against sorrow, man needs God. Man's faith is God's gift. Let that not be interpreted, says Tennyson, as a sign of our frustration. Our reliance on God is not a sign of our bankruptcy, but of our wealth, our resources of hope. God is our refuge. From Him we have our strength to believe; He is the cause of faith in us. It is out of this deep assurance that, in section LV, the poet writes:

The wish, that of the living whole
No life may fail beyond the grave,
Derives it not from what we have
The likest God within the soul?

So bereft of all self-trust, Tennyson waited. He looked on bare nature and what he saw there was creativity and prodigality. Nature was full of design but empty of pity—"so careful of the type; so careless of the single life." He observed that "of fifty seeds she often brings but one to bear." As he reflected he realized that, though grief was hard to bear, it was when his faith failed him that man began to falter and the world began to crumble around him. Grief, he perceived, was like a heavy burden laid upon a man, a pressing burden, weighing

down and bruising the body; but the decay of faith went deeper; it was like a sickness of the heart, striking at the vital part of man, destroying hope in him, and reducing life and the meaning of life to an emaciated specter of his dreams. Sorrow, after all, was of the earth, the lot of all who live this earthly life; but doubt was of the mind, numbing man's spirit; it touched the immortal part of man, his soul. Yet it was an essential element in the scientific mind. To the man of science the skeptical mind is indeed the truth-seeking mind, and the poet allows one voice in him to say,

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

The truth is that the road to faith is rough and steep. It is the road to God, which only the poor in spirit, they that are lowly of heart, at last, can travel. In true humility, sweetened by sorrow, he writes his own conclusion:

I falter where I firmly trod,
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar-stairs
That slope through darkness up to God.

And so, at last, the poet's grief subsides. A purity and a maturity of soul now take its place. The "imaginative woe" of the poet is superseded by a "living love." The earthly creature has found the immortal, and pain has given place to peace. Another Christmas comes and goes; and the New Year brings him a brighter hope. For his dead friend Hallam is with him now. This new spontaneous joy that he feels within himself is of his friend's making. It is God working both above and through nature, through natural means, toward spiritual ends. Natural law and human progress are reconciled and become one with his love for Hallam. The living and the dead are one. Two Christmases have come and gone and they have sealed the truth: God is in his world; let faith arise and "lighten in the lucid East"; let hope lead on and "guide us to the roseate West." Hereafter the temper of the poem is one of resilient faith, its note one of victory. In Section CVI Tennyson returns from

worshipful contemplation to the world of men. It is God's world, and He lays on us the charge to remake it after the pattern of the mind of Christ.

We are not forgetting that Tennyson's view of life is broadly humanistic. It depends much on natural causation and on man's own gift of self-realization. It is ameliorative, evolutionary in conception; it stresses progress through human striving; it looks to nature rather than to history for an authentication of religious truth. But we do not find these any barrier to our acceptance of Tennyson as a Christian poet. If he were a theologian, we should wish to hold him to an account for more systematic thinking. Yet even then we might wish to remember the good example of St. Augustine who, through his hunger for truth, grew from a Manichaean teacher of rhetoric to become a great theologian in the church; and we should thereby remind ourselves that even in his maturest years, not fearing the accusation of being an eclectic and a borrower, he brought his secular learning, including ideas from Platonism, into subjection to the gospel; deigning to use all wisdom, both classical and Christian, for the glory of Christ, that by all these means he might save men. We acquiesce gratefully, therefore, as we find Tennyson expressing for us the hope and the challenge of the climactic lines:

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.
Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land.
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

After reading *In Memoriam* one rises, propelled by a sheer movement from within, and walks into the day. One by one the chains have fallen, the doors have opened, and the imprisoned spirit at last is free. Living with Tennyson, it is discovered, has been a rare experience. The nine years of writing, which in the poem are compressed into a plan of three years,

have been further compressed by us, perhaps into the silent clockless hours of a rainy day. In them, with no earthly foot-steps to follow us, we have walked into the Valley of the Great Shadow. We have lived our griefs again and counted the number of our sorrows; but with this difference: they have presented themselves before us in a picture, rich in the brilliance of joy blended with the shadows of pain. There, within a literary framework we have seen the assemblage of man's hopes and high thoughts holding converse with his inevitable sorrows—now no longer one man's sorrows, but the world's.

Thereafter, behind the curtain which separates our daily round of thoughts from holy things, this poem will be fastened on the wall of our memories forever. We shall not forget it. Experience will not let us forget it. For at those times when the chamber of our thoughts—even our bravest thoughts—is darkest, this curtain will be drawn aside for us and the light of heaven will shine on that picture in our minds, and we shall find full satisfaction in beholding it, and dry our tears in peace.

III

Tennyson's plan of writing a great religious epic began to take form as early as 1834. It seems to have been interrupted by the death of Arthur Hallam; but the poem *Morte d'Arthur* had been written by then, and it furnished a pattern for the *Idylls* that were to follow. For a considerable time, Tennyson was to give his absorbed attention to that other very sorrowfully real Arthur of *In Memoriam*.

The poem *The Idylls of the King*, from the time it began to grow until its completion years later, was designed to depict life on a vast social and historical scale. The stress in it was to be on the fundamental conflict between man's spirit and the outer world. The poet himself gave the *Idylls* a theme, saying that they represented the war of Soul with Sense. King Arthur, of legendary fame, was to portray the man of soul, chivalrous, pure of heart, honorable, a reformer, soldierly in bearing, companionable, deeply religious, unafraid of death, faithful to the cause of Christendom, and assured of its final triumph in the world. Tennyson dedicated the poem to the memory of Albert,

the Prince Consort, the modern gentleman of Christian virtue and knightly bearing. The poet was well aware of our age's material advantage, and its spiritual poverty. His stress, in *Morte d'Arthur*, on the changing order and on the wistfulness in the King's dying words, "My end draws nigh; 'tis time that I were gone," contrasted strongly with Robert Browning's buoyant spirit in such a later poem as *Asolando*, in which the poet, with his fancy free, delighted to toy with death and to "greet the unseen with a cheer."

In the *Idylls* two opposite ideas meet in Tennyson's mind. They are (1) the reformation of the world order and (2) the quest for the holy life; and these ideas are ideally represented in the characters of Arthur the King and Sir Galahad. Inwardly, as we have said, there is the conflict of "soul with sense"; outwardly, there is the conflict between good and evil men. Life, as Tennyson saw it, was struggle. The only question was: Shall a man fight his own battle in his soul, to win the good life; or shall he set out to right the wrong of the world? The monastic and the utopian ideals contend for possession in the poet's mind. The tenor of the poem favors the modern Arthur; but the finest of the *Idylls* is the *Holy Grail* which enshrines the medieval Galahad; and it is easy to see that the poet is at his best when all earthly endeavor yields for him to a vision of that realm where the good is all, and all conflict ends. It does not matter here that the search for the Holy Grail, according to the theme of the poem, "is a mistake; an evil, not a good"; that "the true life is to bring heaven to earth for others."³ It is the poet's description of this exalted religious experience that enthralls us, and suggests that union of poetry and supernatural revelation which we habitually associate with Dante. The mystical vision, when Tennyson writes of it, penetrates the words and lines, giving to them, before our wondering eyes, the chaste beauty of a sacrament. In the poem *Sir Galahad* Tennyson pictures the knight as grave and prayerful and pure of heart. The poet's spirit is lifted to that high mood in which religious passion is added to romance, as he says:

³ See Stopford Brooke, *Tennyson*, p. 323 f.

When down the stormy crescent goes,
A light before me swims,
Between dark stems the forest glows,
I hear a noise of hymns.
Then by some secret shrine I ride;
I hear a voice, but none are there;
The stalls are void, the doors are wide,
The tapers burning fair.
Fair gleams the snowy altar-cloth,
The silver vessels sparkle clean,
The shrill bell rings, the censer swings,
And solemn chaunts resound between.

Sometimes on lonely mountain-meres
I find a magic bark.
I leap on board; no helmsman steers;
I float till all is dark.
A gentle sound, an awful light!
Three angels bear the Holy Grail;
With folded feet, in stoles of white,
On sleeping wings they sail.
Ah, blessed vision! blood of God!
My spirit beats her mortal bars,
As down dark tides the glory slides,
And starlike mingles with the stars.

This mystical experience, as Tennyson presents it to us, has a recognized place in our Christian tradition. Since St. Paul and St. Augustine, it has been one of the distinguishing signs of our faith. Its crown of glory is the Christian's saintly life. Here, in this realm where the deep calls to the deep in the soul of man, where the margins fade, the curtain is lifted, and the mind passes "through a gate, or drawbridge, into the central Keep of the universe"—here is a place where God is altogether real and His rule is unquestioned. Here, truly, His kingdom is come, His will is done. There is in this blest state no reaching for hope; all, including our dissolving sensations, is rapt fulfillment.

It is of similar periods of recurrent flight "out of this earthly dress" that such seventeenth century English poets as Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne have left us some of our litera-

ture's loftiest monuments. St. Teresa, also, writes in her autobiography of the suddenness of this experience, of the joyous divine delight of it, of this quick irresistible invasion of the soul, "before you can collect your thoughts, or help yourself in any way, and you see and feel it as a strong eagle, rising upward and carrying you away on its wings." And Jacob Boehme, recalling this same rich blessedness, and how it came to him in an hour of stress and trouble, wrote:

When in my resolved zeal I made such an assault, storm,
and onset upon God . . . with a resolution to hazard my life
upon it, suddenly my spirit did break through the Gate not
without the assistance of the Holy Spirit, and I reached to
the innermost Birth of the Deity and there I was embraced
with love as a bridegroom embraces his bride.

(From *The Aurora*)

St. Teresa was a Catholic; Jacob Boehme was a Protestant, a quite typical one. Passive ecstasy and the active will are here set in contrasting positions. But the end is the same. It is peace with God, a comprehension of life's meaning, and rest for the soul. Tennyson gives incomparable expression to it in *The Holy Grail*. In the poem Sir Galahad is talking of the great experience that came to him. King Arthur, when he had dubbed him knight, had said to him: "God make thee good as thou art beautiful!" And the youth, comely in appearance and gracious in manner, felt himself ordained to do great things. His sister had beheld the vision of the Holy Grail, and now it came to him. It was a summer night. The banquet was ended, and Galahad was seated in Merlin's chair:

And all at once, as there we sat, we heard
A cracking and a riving of the roofs,
And rending, and a blast, and overhead
Thunder, and in the thunder was a cry.
And in the blast there smote along the hall
A beam of light seven times more clear than day:
And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail
All cover'd with a luminous cloud
And none might see who bare it, and it past.

But every knight beheld his fellow's face
As in a glory, and all the knights arose,
And, staring each at other like dumb men
Stood.

The vision was hidden in a cloud. But Galahad had made a vow that he would go in search of the Holy Grail until he found it. The vision later was revealed when on his journey he came to a forest chapel and, laying his lance against the chapel door, he entered and knelt in prayer. There before him on the altar lay the elements of the Holy Sacrament—the young knight thus tells the story:

I, Galahad, saw the Grail,
The Holy Grail, descend upon the shrine.
I saw the fiery face as of a child
That smote itself into the bread, and went;
And hither am I come; and never yet
Hath what thy sister taught me first to see,
This Holy Thing, fail'd from my side, nor come
Cover'd, but moving with me night and day,
Fainter by day, but always in the night
Blood-red, and sliding down the blacken'd marsh
Blood-red, and in the sleeping mere below
Blood-red.

But the meaning of the poem would be lost if it began and ended on a note of ecstasy. There is in the *Idylls* another and graver theme. That theme is not individual but social; and it goes beyond the salvation of man to the redemption of the world. It reaches beyond experience into history. In sounding this major redemptive note, Tennyson insists the vision is not given for its own sake, or for the Christian saint's sake. It is given for conquest. By its might men are to go out into the world to establish the kingdom of God in a pagan society. Sir Galahad tells of the effect of the vision in these words:

And in the strength of this (vision) I rode,
Shattering all evil customs everywhere,
And past thro' Pagan realms, and made them mine,

And clash'd with Pagan hordes, and bore them down,
 And broke thro' all, and in the strength of this
 Come victor.

But Arthur, too, has his vision. It comes to him in the hour when the kingdom of heaven seems gone up in a mist of failure and when his mind is clouded with a misunderstanding of the purposes of God. All is taken from him but the knowledge that God's cause will not fail. In this mood the dying Arthur bids farewell to his loyal knight Sir Bedivere. All through the day the battle has been fought against the infidel. Just at evening, the king has received his mortal wound, and,

. . . because his wound was deep,
 The bold Sir Bedivere uplifted him,
 And bore him to a chapel nigh the field,
 A broken chancel with a broken cross,
 That stood on a dark strait of barren land:
 On one side lay the Ocean, and on one
 Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

It has been a hard fight, and now he must give up Excalibur, the sword of the Spirit, which the Lady of the Lake, "clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful"—that is, the Christian church—has given him. He bids Sir Bedivere cast Excalibur into the lake. The knight wonders, hesitates, and at last obeys, and Excalibur is caught by the hand of the great Lady, brandished three times, and drawn into the lake. Arthur, king of the Round Table, is now dying, and the three stately queens of death, "black-stoled, black-hooded," wearing crowns of gold, place him in the barge. Sir Bedivere, overcome, cries out:

Ah, my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go,
 Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?
 For now I see the true old times are dead,
 When every morning brought a noble chance,
 And every chance brought out a noble knight.
 Such times have not been since the light that led
 The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.
 But now the whole Round Table is dissolved
 Which was an image of the mighty world;

And I, the last, go forth companionless,
 And the days darken round me, and the years,
 Among new men, strange faces, other minds.

But Arthur speaks for Tennyson, and his words echo our thoughts. They first vindicate divine providence; second, assert a *higher good* beyond any one custom of the world; third, affirm a ready acceptance of life within the divine order; fourth, declare that our perfection is not in ourselves but in God; fifth, stress our human solidarity; and finally, rest on the fact of our participation in the being of God, through prayer. Arthur the king, bidding this "shadow-world" farewell, says:

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
 And God fulfils himself in many ways,
 Lest one good custom should corrupt the world. . . .
 I have lived my life, and that which I have done
 May He within himself make pure! . . .
 Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
 Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
 Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
 For what are men better than sheep or goats
 That nourish a blind life within the brain,
 If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
 Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
 For so the whole round earth is every way
 Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.

Tennyson's poetry gradually closes on this enduring note, to which his later religious poems are the echoing and moving refrain. We have already referred to two or three of them. One is a hymn in which the poet sums up his religious thought and feeling in anthem-like verses of adoration, as he says:

Hallowed be Thy name—Halleluiah!
 Infinite Ideality!
 Immeasurable Reality!
 Infinite Personality!
 Hallowed be Thy name—Halleluiah!

Another poem that may be called philosophical, but cannot be subjected to particular logical examination, is *The Higher*

Pantheism, a strangely moving and mystical work. Its title recognizes God as the World-Soul; but when Tennyson refers to man's power to say "I am I" we see clearly that he does not mean to sacrifice individual human personality, as is also evident when he calls on man to fulfil his destiny even though the Glory around him may reach him only in "broken gleams" and in a "stifled splendour." Man is man; he is himself. But he is in the midst of God's presence, as the poet implies when he says:

Speak to Him thou for He hears, and
 Spirit with Spirit can meet—
 Closer is He than breathing, and nearer
 than hands and feet.

A particularly significant poem, a clear echo of the two voices that continually sound in the poet's ear, is *De Profundis*—"Out of the Deep." In it the poet greets his son at the hour of his birth: first, as a creature of nature; second, as a child of the divine Spirit. It is exemplified here, as we should expect, that what in an older day was called the debate between the body and the soul never ends while Tennyson lives. It is again revealed in the poem *The Ancient Sage*, where, as in *The Two Voices* and *In Memoriam*, faith has its parley with doubt. Here, however, it is in the quiet mood of one who, having long counted over the issues of the great argument, wisely concludes that faith is neither nature's nor reason's slave, but is "essentially superior to proof"—as the poet says:

Thou canst not prove the Nameless, O my son,
 Nor canst thou prove the world thou movest in,
 Thou canst not prove that thou art body alone,
 Nor canst thou prove that thou art spirit alone, . . .
 Thou canst not prove that I, who speak with thee,
 Am not thyself in converse with thyself,
 For nothing worthy proving can be proven,
 Nor yet disproven: wherefore thou be wise,
 Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt,
 And cling to Faith beyond the forms of Faith! ⁴

⁴ The reader is referred to Raymond Alden's *Alfred Tennyson*, pp. 286-349, for a fine exposition of these shorter religious poems.

Tennyson was a "modern" poet to the end. As Mr. Alden has expressed it, Tennyson did not "blink the difference between knowledge and faith." At the age of eighty years, in *By An Evolutionist*, he wrote:

I have climbed to the snows of Age, and I
gaze at a field in the Past, . . .
But I hear no yelp of the beast, and the
Man is quiet at last.

Speculative and quiet and trusting, he faced the unknown future; his gift of music was joined to his gift of vision to the last. And nothing he wrote during his long life so united the two main elements of Tennyson's faith, the speculative and the mystical, enshrining them in a meaningful image for us to behold, as the valedictory poem, *Crossing the Bar*. Unlike Dante's rapt and beatific vision when he beheld celestial knowledge in the transfigured face of Beatrice, here we see the poet standing majestic and lonely on the vast shore of time, looking out on the ocean of eternity, feeling the tug of its mysterious outgoing tide, and seeing the lingering day waiting and calling for him beyond the banks of the west. In quiet conviction, he says:

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,
But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.
Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;
For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

Chapter 6

BROWNING

Robert Browning was a man of exceptional genius. But he was a normal person; and he liked normal people in their everyday life. He was, as Mr. G. K. Chesterton says, a Commoner, a man of the middle class, a Puritan in morals, frankly honest, a hater of sham, industrious, eager for knowledge, and genuinely religious. He was unstintingly curious about human beings; he revelled in the goings-on in obscure corners and far-off places, and in little men's minds; his heroes were unusual for being unknown; his chosen characters from history were not the great, like Moses, or Plato, or Shakespeare, but the strange and half-forgotten men whom he all but raised from the dead and made great.

Browning may be said to have understood life because, to him, simply being alive was a stupendous fact and a vastly rich experience. He was fond of wild outdoor creatures and of household pets; but we do not ever read that he held man to be an animal. He recognized and pointed out the difference between the animal and man, not their similarities. Man was Browning's first and last love, a creature with soul, made in God's image, a special creation whose dusky past is as nothing compared to his future and immortal destiny. Grandeur in man is not required to prove his worth and divine destiny; the poet asks only for some dim awareness of his essential nature and of God's plan for him, of which we are given significant hints in the character, for example, of Browning's Grammarian, who says:

What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!
Man has Forever.

I

Almost any reader quickly discovers that Browning is the poet of the soul. But the rather astonishing truth about him is that he sees the soul in the lowest type of human being. It is his determined aim to show that no human is without some pictured conception of the divine image within him, no matter how primitive or degraded the creature may be. And it is the distortion, not the absence, of this picture, this divine image, that Browning points out and deplors. For instance, in 1862, shortly after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* and while talk of the "missing link" is the popular vogue, he writes the poem *Caliban upon Setebos*. The poem is an exposition of the verse in the Fiftieth Psalm: "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself." It is not surprising to Browning that Caliban thinks as he does about God; but it is shocking that men in the nineteenth century should do no better than think like Caliban who, sprawling at full length in the mud of the cave, talks out the problem in his naturalistic manner, saying that the great Deity, as he knows him, merely

Thinketh, He made thereat the sun, this isle,
Trees and the fowls here, beast and creeping things, . . .
Make what Himself would fain, in a manner, be . . .
Things He admires and mocks too,—that is it.
Because, so brave, so better though they be,
It nothing skills if He begin to plague.

Browning rebukes the modern savage who talks as Caliban does, who would return to brutal nature, argue the Christian God out of vogue, or subordinate him to "science," and call the argument progress. To Browning, progress represents the growth of the soul, not its denial; and the poet expects men of his day to do better thinking than the savage did on his own level; else all hope of human advancement is lost. Browning sturdily believes that such hope exists. He stakes his exuberant faith on it and claims, in such a typical poem as *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, that the highest reaches of the soul are not to be attained through

willful youthful aspiration, but through the mature and serene vision of old age,—as when the saintly Ezra says:

I see the whole design,
I, who saw power, see now Love perfect too:
Perfect I call Thy plan:
Thanks that I was a man!

Nevertheless, Browning found much to praise in the primitive man, and in primitive instincts wherever they appeared in their natural state, or where they somehow suddenly are unearthed in the advanced and sophisticated man, or where they have suggested the hidden mystery of the soul. The rent which the half-savage man made into his own mind by his half-demonic utterances enabled the poet to get glimpses there of the presence of God. Browning looked with understanding on this half-tamed child of nature surrounded by spirits, with his mind on the spirit in himself, supernaturally possessed, alert, fighting disease and death as if they were demons, fearing blood, yet shedding it instantly in a moment of glutting passion. Browning understood men and liked them for what they were at their soul's core where life is mystery, adventure, uncertainty of success, beset with failure.

In the poem *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, beyond its intent of symbolizing the idea that "he that endureth to the end shall be saved," there are flashes of light by which the poet looks into a man's soul; by which he sees there the intermixture of things terrible and beautiful which reminds us who glimpse them of the fantastic power of a drawing by Doré; and through which the poet observes how terror forces the soul toward the pursuit of beauty—as if the soul were loosed from the flesh by some twist of agony of which evil is the cause.

This is Browning's doctrine of the *use* of evil, as a means to achieve a providential end; and it implies also the final rejection of evil—like the throwing away of a useless goad—when this end is attained. We are given a picture of Childe Roland as he journeys toward the Tower, haunted by specters of a savage age, hastening to be by them, yet uncertain of the future. He is led by a voice within him; the pilgrimage is dark;

he is lost on a gray plain at a road's end. Behind him is the sound of laughter, the "skull-like laugh" of the hoary cripple with malicious eyes who has bidden him to take that road. Before him he sees a land of skulls, of ragged thistlestalks; a "stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare"; a river that crosses his path like a serpent; two hills "crouched like two bulls locked horn in horn in fight." It is an uncharted region through which Childe Roland must travel, a bewildering world in which all tender things seem destined to die; yet, in the midst of this scene of "ugly heights and heaps" there rises the Tower, seen at sunset, just as if the day

Came back again for that! before it left,
The dying sunset kindled through a cleft:

and, after that, the enveloping glory of it all as the drawbridge is lowered and Childe Roland enters through "a sheet of flame" into the realm of the blest. Browning does not deny the facts: the journey of man is a long one; savage voices follow him through the ages, and through his own life; and even the good Ben Ezra must note, though life's cup in old age is full to overflowing, that about its rim,

Skull-things in order grim
Grow out, in graver mood,—

and demand the discipline required for the perfection of the saint.

Browning's essential humanism is apparent. He feeds his strong intellect on natural passion; and he has what we may call the power to relish life with gusto. He likes men in whatever state he finds them; yet not for being what they are now, but for possessing in themselves the power of growth. To him that power is something divine, primitively implanted, teleological in design, and a sure proof of the active presence of God. For some special proof of this manifest divine presence in man, the poet often paints pictures of the barbaric and grotesque in human nature, finding instances of it especially in the far-off corners of civilization or on the perimeter of personal psychological experience. We observe the touch of admiration that

Browning has for the plain barbarian, and note the opportunity that this type of person offers him to apply his razor's edge of analysis in the search for man's soul. Browning, obviously, is a romantic poet. He delights in the unusual, in whatever is original, fresh, full of wonder and daring. Colorful people, gypsies, artists, poets and musicians, especially attract him. Even men of vicious thoughts open their minds to him, and he finds in them that inextinguishable hunger for beauty, for love, for immortality, of which the poet is an ardent exponent.

An example of that fact is found in the poem *The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church*, in which Browning's mind, entering the cleavage he has made between the artistic and moral emotions of the Bishop, penetrates to the soul in him and finds there, in the midst of bitter jealousy and much silly pride, the man's ineradicable faith in God. The poem's outer framework suggests the Renaissance, its anti-medieval trend toward the secular and the earthly life; but within this pattern, that somehow suggests the church in the world, Browning draws a picture of the dying Bishop's half-submerged but still blest vision of hope, as he says:

And then how I shall lie through centuries,
 And hear the blessed mutter of the Mass, . . .
 And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste
 Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke! . . .
 And as yon tapers dwindle, . . . strange thoughts
 Grow, with a certain humming in my ears
 About the life before I lived this life, . . .
 Saint Praxed at his Sermon on the Mount . . .
 Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage.

But if Browning's humanism includes the barbarian, it does not idealize him. It is in the civilized man that the poet sees the soul rise and move toward its predestined goal. The citizen is a *social* being. He typifies that fellowship of free souls which lies at the basis of Browning's doctrine of love. In the capacity of citizen, man rises toward culture; he becomes a responsible person; he finds in others aspirations like his own. For the first time, actually, he knows true friendship, recognizes

by his side another man, and feels the joyous strength of comradeship. To a poet like Browning this is a step into a larger existence; and the man who takes this step henceforth lives in the world of men, and that world exists in him. He feels humanity's pulse. He loves.

But this sense of world fraternity is not a merely earthly thing. The patriot's ardor, the pioneer's toil, the peasant's dumb love of the soil, are, like their own blood and breadth of life, God's gifts. In them a divine commonality of love is revealed which suggests the kingdom of God. More than any poet of his time, Browning perceived this truth, reasoned it out, and wrote of it in poem after poem. Nations, as societies of men and women, interested him greatly, but he cared nothing for the abstract idea of nationalism. He had no race prejudice; he was himself of interracial blood. His mother's father was German; his mother's mother was Scottish; his father's father was an Englishman; his father's mother was a West Indian Creole. He was born in England. He loved the English poets: Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, and in his boyhood, Shelley. Of his admiration for Shelley he wrote exquisitely in the *Memorabilia*:

I crossed a moor, with a name of its own
And a certain use in the world no doubt,
Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone
'Mid the blank miles round about:

For there I picked up on the heather
And there I put inside my breast
A moulted feather, an eagle-feather!
Well, I forget the rest.

But his heart was in the little boot-shaped land of Latin culture of which he wrote the lines which now almost everyone knows:

Open my heart and you will see
Graved inside of it, "Italy."
Such lovers old are I and she;
So it always was, so shall ever be!

Yet Browning also had a fondness for Germany which almost parallels that for Italy. It dates back to his youth and to the ideas which then fermented in his brain, as he describes them in the significant poem *Paracelsus*. The poet's thirst for speculative knowledge, for intricate detail, for profundity, his interest in science, in music, in art, in theology, are comparable to those of Goethe. An example of the best of German influence on him is the poem *Abt Vogler*. In it music and philosophy are woven into a fabric of faith, a mystical-rational theology in which all earthly senses are transformed into heavenly sight, all human enterprise flowers in eternal reality, when Vogler's fingers move on the keys of the organ and Browning lets him say:

But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,
 Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo, they are!
 And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,
 That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a
 Star.

All this range of thought illustrates Browning's universality, his deep essential passion, and his undeniable humanity. It proves him a citizen of the world, a man of large mind, above provincialism, bigotry, and mere artistry, opposed to every form of charlatanry, pseudo-sophistication, pretense, and, in general, all humbug. He is sane, sociable, and religious. He likes men for their sheer manhood. To be alive, to be a man; to feel his life to be linked with another's, through nature, through a common task and trust; and to have this life joined with God, in soundness of body, mind, and soul—that is the essential passion of Browning and his poetry. This human-divine vigor, this warm blood dynamic with his religious spirit emanates from every major poem. It is the very substance of such a masterpiece as *Saul*. The poem is Browning: its analysis, its glorification of our earthly existence made perfect by the touch of the heavenly—as we see it in these lines:

Oh, our manhood's prime vigor!

No spirit feels waste,
 Not a muscle is stopped in its playing nor sinew unbraced.

Oh, the wild joys of living! the leaping from rock up to rock,
The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree, the cool silver
shock

Of the plunge in a pool's living water, . . .
How good is man's life, the mere living! how fit to employ
All the heart and the soul and the senses forever in joy!

The spirit of the cavalier in Browning's poetry is distinctive. It is something one looks for as one anticipates the taste of citrus fruit or the odor of horse and saddle. There are those to whom this rugged greatheartedness, sometimes half religious aspiration and half roguery, is what makes him their poet. They find him most irresistible, for instance, in his *Cavalier Tunes*, when he sings:

God for King Charles! Pym and such carles
To the Devil that prompts 'em their treacherous parles!
Cavaliers, up! Lips from the cup,
Hands from the pasty, nor bite take nor sup
Till you're—
Marching along, fifty-score strong,
Great-hearted gentlemen, singing this song.

This spirit of gallantry, sometimes overlooked in reading Browning's poetry, is close to the core of his art and thought. Everyone knows of his elopement with Elizabeth Barrett, his virile winsome personality, his London popularity. He possessed a positive social genius, and attracted people irresistibly. Seldom has a poet so united in himself the qualities of sense and soul, a love of earth and of God. In *Fra Lippo Lippi*, he sets forth his conception of this integrated view of life:

A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
So ill, . . . Take the prettiest face,
The Prior's niece . . . is it so pretty
You can't discover if it means hope, fear,
Sorrow or joy? Won't beauty go with these?
Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,
Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
And then add soul and heighten them threefold? . . .
If you get simple beauty and naught else,
You get about the best thing God invents.

To Browning, the unveiling of the mystery of sex was an unveiling of the face of God. He beheld in love's apocalypse both man's gentler and his diviner passion. He saw in it the dual wonder of creativity and surrender, types of the soul's activity and the sovereign and tender love of God. It was natural, therefore, that others should see in marriage as he conceived it—and in his own marriage with Elizabeth Barrett Browning—a symbol of the unity of the soul with God.

*Throughout man's life, Browning says, if man learns at all, he is love-taught, and if he lives at all, he is love-born. In his first important poem, *Pauline*, he writes:

Thou lovest me; . . .
And I look to thee and I trust in thee,
As in a Northern night one looks alway
Unto the East for morn and spring and joy.

And in the last year of his life, almost at the end of his last book of poems, he pens a little love lyric that closes with these words:

Truth, that's brighter than gem,
Trust, that's purer than pearl—
Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe—all were for me
In the kiss of one girl.

No wall, in Browning's mind, separates the senses from the soul. They do not stand in antithesis to one another, as do light and darkness, or good and evil. They are rather to be thought of as the transverse threads of a piece of tapestry. On life's loom the fixed threads, which we may call the soul's warp, are firmly fixed and placed in us by the hand of the divine Weaver; but within the shuttle of earthly circumstance there are the colorful threads of the senses; and, as the shuttle moves to and fro, the fabric is woven, is given its texture, its pleasing or displeasing touch. Only when the entire cloth is woven do we finally know its pattern. Or, to put this truth in the poet's own words in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*:

For pleasant is this flesh;
Our soul, in its rose-mesh
Pulled ever to the earth, . . .

Let us not always say,
"Spite of this flesh today
I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!"
As the bird wings and sings,
Let us cry, "All good things
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps
soul!"

II

But it is in his Christian poems that Browning makes his deep appeal to us. In them he charts and interprets to us the earthly journey of the soul. Some of these poems are landmarks of nineteenth century religious thought. Among them are *Paracelsus*, *Saul*, *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*, *Cleon*, the *Epistle of Karshish*, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, and *A Death in the Desert*. Together, they deal with four vital cognate doctrines of the Christian faith: the doctrines of God, of Man, of Christian revelation, and of the immortality of the soul.

A more exact study of Browning should begin with the prefatory poem *Pauline*. Though a juvenile poem, imperfect in style and structure, it is alive with the promise of the poet's genius. What the poem contains interests us—as Wordsworth's *Prelude* interests us—for its self-revelation. It is spiritual history. In it the poet is downcast by his sense of what we should call original sin. It is in his very nature, he cries out, a defect threatening his ruin. Only love—typified in the person of Pauline—can live unconsumed by it. Only love can endure in calm, quiet assurance in a world so glutted and sick with despair—only love and poetry; the latter being by the young poet symbolized in Shelley the Sun-treader, poet of the soul's divine aspiration. Without love, says Browning, the world lies torpid and on the verge of disaster; without poetry the soul is inert and apathetic and unable to rise out of the ruin of this painful earth. Glorious it is, says Browning, to rise out of this our clay in love's divine experience:

Like a girl one has silently loved long
In her first loneliness in some retreat,
When, late emerged, all gaze and glow to view

Her fresh eyes and soft hair and lips which bloom
Like a mountain berry.

Yet still more glorious it is to see with the eyes of a poet, to have a vision of things eternal, as did Shelley whom the youthful Browning, in this high moment, salutes again :

Yet, Sun-treader, all hail! From my heart's heart
I bid thee hail! E'en in my wildest dreams,
I proudly feel I would have thrown to dust
The wreath of fame which seemed o'erhanging me,
To see thee for a moment as thou art.
And if thou livest, if thou lovest, spirit!
Remember me who set this final seal
To wandering thought—that one so pure as thou
Could never die.

But the poet knows he cannot live always on that mountain height. He must come down. He feels himself drifting slowly earthward. His aspirations have ended—where? Exactly, on earth. Is the soul, then, mocked by this world of sense? The maturing poet's answer is: The soul rises ever, after every fall; it will do so after the last fall of death; it will rise even into eternity. He says :

Souls alter not, and mine, must still advance;
Strange that I knew not, when I flung away
My youth's chief aims, . . .
I cannot chain my soul: it will not rest
In its clay prison, this most narrow sphere.

Although Browning does not reach heaven in these words, his spirit's direction is discernible. The eagle in him has spread his wings. How far he is to fly through continents of thought he does not know. But we, now reading Browning, know the distance of that flight; and having seen above us his luminous wings, we do not hesitate to call him "Sun-treader," as he called Shelley.

And now we turn to *Paracelsus*.¹ The poem is long. It extends, in the Student's Cambridge Edition, through thirty-five closely written pages. There is in it the sketch of an actual historical character. He is a sixteenth century physicist intent

on ferreting out the secret of the world. But Browning puts this man's search to a special use. The poem becomes a study on the theme of the soul's aspiration. Festus is the close friend of Paracelsus, and his adviser; Aprile is the Italian poet, typifying love, as Paracelsus typifies knowledge. The scholar and the poet are thus set side by side in Browning's mind, and so also are the two worlds of reason and faith.

How shall truth be found out and the end of life be attained? Paracelsus at first answers: by a knowledge of nature, of history, of man. Then he adds that he will pursue this knowledge singlehanded. He will not learn from others, or from the past. His mind will pursue a trackless course, alone. For he believes that knowledge comes from within; it is letting the truth out of the mind, not into it. Festus warns him "that the road to knowledge is *not* trackless," and cites the work of Aristotle who followed Socrates and Plato. Paracelsus demurs and says:

I go to gather this
The sacred knowledge, here and there dispersed
About the world, long lost or never found. . . .
Are there not, Festus, are there not, dear Michal,
Two points in the adventure of the diver,
One—when, a beggar, he prepares to plunge,
One—when, a prince, he rises with his pearl?
Festus, I plunge.

And Festus answers: "We wait you when you rise!"

The pause in the poem here recalls to the writer one August in bygone days, and the strange fortune that befell a certain farmer. This man had an aptitude of hand by which he could turn almost anything into something useful. From a rotating treadwheel of talk, by his mental dexterity he could make an argument by which you would suppose he were climbing through the clouds. Only you felt the inevitable "letdown" when his roller-coaster gyrations brought you to a standstill just where you started. He had in his mind gone through the aspiring motion of a dream.

On an August day when the wind lifted the clouds as if they were huge white tumbleweeds rolled through the heavens, and

the horizon on the prairie was clear and spaceless like a definition of infinity, you could see Pete standing behind the belt wheel of the engine observing with a technician's eye the operation of threshing oats or wheat. The men at work, pitching or sacking or stacking, moved before him in a cloud of thresher's dust. Sometimes, when the straw was rusty, the cloud was red and the sun seen through it looked like a ball of blood. As the days wore into the weeks Pete's alert and scrutinizing features grew on you. There was a gleam in his eye as he looked intently on the wide traveling power belt, and you could see that he knew it was his engine that moved and controlled the entire crew. And when his hand moved to close the throttle, everything stopped: the machinery, the men, the day. His pull of the whistle cord set the hands of the household into double motion to serve the thresher's meals.

Pete could not haul a load of wheat, or wield a shovel, or mend a belt to make it hold through the day; he could not eat a thresher's good dinner because of his bad stomach. But he could look prophetic. And at night when the farmers were gone home, and the crickets sang in the cool air, and the odor of a rusty dew crept in upon the lawn, he would talk to you, dreamily but intensely, of what he could do: he could out-farm our neighbor, outwit the county lawyer, and, if allowed, out-govern the President.

From the low intensity of his voice it was easy to infer—if momentarily you forgot your man—that he could do things; he could even, perhaps, kill a man. He hated intensely as he talked; he hated men who thwarted him in his ambition. A fire burned in him, an intense thirst. Here was a man who aspired. Invariably, after a rainy day or two during which there was no threshing, Pete failed to reappear. He had drowned his aspiration sea-deep in alcohol.

In the after years Pete, unfit for responsibility, took to digging ditches. It was his way, everyone knew, of digging his own grave. His death was a merciful release from the abject fever of reaching for a prize where it was not to be found. Aspiration may be a mockery where faith is not the substance,

where God is not the cause, and the doing of His will is not the end of man's striving.

And here we return to the story of Paracelsus. Nine years pass, and Festus has failed. Quite by chance he meets Aprile who tells him that he has deserved to fail in his quest of truth through his neglect of love. Science and art must search out life together. The intellectual and the intuitive natures of man are like the right and left hands clasped together to encompass a truth.

Aprile, too, has failed through his neglect of reason. He is dying; but his lesson lives on in Paracelsus' mind. Five years later he has become a famous professor and scholar. Men hail him as having attained; but he knows he also has failed, for he is praised for destroying old beliefs without himself coming nearer to the truth. He now resigns his professorship to begin life anew. He will aspire again, but this time through love and knowledge kept together, and more eagerly and with renewed zest. A fever burns in him beyond his human strength. He becomes reckless and mistakes the expenditure of his vital energy for aspiration.

Time goes on. At last Paracelsus is succeeding; but he is dying. Yet with death before him he has come to a knowledge of his life's aim. It is not a rational knowledge of God or of life that a man actually seeks, he concludes. Rather it is the higher intelligence and power to live by the strength of the knowledge already given to him as a man, to live out this knowledge as if it were a wealth to be spent, a revelation of God to be made plain in the course of history, and to each man in the life after death. In a word, absolute knowledge of God is not some human achievement: it is gift; and it comes through revelation. God is revealed to man according to a divine plan implicit in the world's creation. Man's present calling is to live out that plan.

But who that knows this divine gift, and has begun to live by it, finds the years on earth sufficient for its full experience and for its outpouring on the world? Time is not enough for this complete revelation of God. God has, and man needs, eter-

nity. This is Browning's argument for immortality, to which he lets Paracelsus add the high conclusion :

Well. 'Tis a strange thing: I am dying, Festus,
And now that fast the storm of life subsides,
I first perceive how great the whirl has been. . . .

The hurricane is spent,
And the good boat speeds through the brightening weather ; . . .
And this is death : I understand it all.
New being waits me ; new perceptions must
Be born in me before I plunge therein ;
Which last is Death's affair ; and while I speak,
Minute by minute he is filling me
With power ; and while my foot is on the threshold
Of boundless life—the door unopened yet,
All preparations not complete within—
I turn new knowledge upon old events,
And the effect is . . . but I must not tell ;
It is not lawful. Your own turn will come
One day. Wait, Festus ! You will die like me. . . .

If I stoop
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time ; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast ; its splendor, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom : I shall emerge one day.
You understand me ? I have said enough ?

Browning shows the same prophetic vision in the poem *Saul*. Only in it the revelation is biblical, and in the poem's climax triumphantly Christian. It is an extraordinary poem. It is clear that Browning wrote it while the material in his mind was at white heat : in 1845, the first nine sections ; and in 1855, or near then, the remainder. One perceives, as one reads, the magnificence of it : its imagery and emotion, alike, are powerful ; it proceeds according to an orderly plan ; and it closes with the touching sounds and tenderly spent rapture of a Beethoven symphony.

The framework of *Saul* is theological. Its theme is man's and the world's redemption. The poem begins with a picture of Saul in the agony of spiritual conflict. We remember, as we read, the story in First Samuel XVIII—the scene in the

tent; Saul's jealousy, his anger, and agony; the summons to David to play the harp in his presence; Saul's sudden throwing of the spear to slay David; the biblical writer's account that David behaved himself wisely and that the Lord was with him. But in the poem David says nothing of the hurled spear. He speaks only of Saul's strife with his own spirit. The strong man's soul is in darkness and without hope. Within the tent there is a fearful blackness—symbol of the unredeemed world. And the poet completes the picture in language so suggestively theological that we need the commentary of John III:14 for its full comprehension. There, as on a cross, like the serpent in the wilderness, leans the gigantic figure of the tormented king:

He stood as erect as that tent-prop, both arms stretched out
wide

On the great cross-support in the centre, that goes to each
side;

He relaxed not a muscle, but hung there as, caught in his pangs
And waiting his change, the king-serpent all heavily hangs,
Far away from his kind, in the pine, till deliverance come
With the spring-time,—so agonized Saul, drear and stark,
blind and dumb.

And now David begins to sing and to play. The theme of his song is this earthly life. Life is good—when it is well lived. It is worth a poet's song. There is the world of nature; there is the world of human fellowship; there is the world of our daily round of living in which we laugh with those who laugh and mourn with those who mourn; there is the world of worship in which "the Levites go up to the altar in glory enthroned." For each of these there springs a melody from David's harp. Finally, there is the sheer joy of being alive, of existence in the senses, in the mind, in the soul. These are cause enough for a song of gratitude.

But that, says the poet, is not the entire picture. After life comes death; and Saul will die. Death is a reality. Yet even death is good. Have we not all walked through a vineyard in late September and seen the rich grapes hanging on the vines? Yet not one grape fulfills its use until it is crushed. Similarly,

death causes the wine of our lives to flow, to nourish, and to enrich the lives of others. That is our earthly immortality. It is the good name we leave behind, the monument, the fame. The generations to come will say: "We are harvesting what he labored to store up and release to us:—let us not forget him." There is consolation in that fact. And Saul thought likewise, as David says, for he

. . . spoke not, but slow

Lifted up the hand slack at his side, till he laid it with care
Soft and grave, but in mild settled will, on my brow: through
my hair
The large fingers were pushed, and he bent back my head, with
kind power—
All my face back, intent to peruse it, as men do a flower.
Thus held he me there with his great eyes that scrutinized
mine.
And, oh, all my heart how it loved him!

Here the song of David ends. But not his prophecy. Shall the life of man end with nothing more than the poet's praise? Shall not the poet prophesy, asks Browning, and express the truth of that which exists, but has not yet been lived? Shall he not also write of the life to come? What of man's love, which leaves him strong in his soul though helpless against death, which reaches beyond death, seeing things more clearly there than things on earth? What of this heavenly solicitude of the soul? Can God who is all-powerful, as He is all-loving, be thought unable to give to the soul the boon of immortality it desires and by which it would praise its Maker? These are the thoughts in Browning's mind as he concludes his argument. He himself now speaks—though still through David—directly to us. As God has created, so too, in His own way, He can save; He can redeem and rescue from waste all that He has made. What He has once made He can make anew. Browning summarizes the exact truth for us in *Abt Vogler*:

What, have fear of change from thee who art ever the same?
Doubt that thy power can fill the heart that thy power
expands?
There shall never be one lost good! . . .

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
 Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power,
 Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
 When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.

The voices of Abt Vogler and of David are in full accord. The soul's regeneration is begun on earth; its perfection is achieved in heaven. Evil is overcome and banished; good is triumphant; the kingdom of God is attained. This, at last, is the poet's conclusion: God, who is all love, is also almighty. On that keynote the writer of *Saul* ends, as he began, his song.

Browning saw with open eyes the world's black darkness. But he did not take a dark view of it. He refused to let the darkness enter his eyes, remembering, "If the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!" He held it a sin to see only the world's sin. His mind was on the light that shone in an evil world. Sections 18 and 19 of *Saul* give us a glimpse of Browning's insight into this fundamental Christian truth: in the one we have his confession of faith; in the other, the record of his religious experience. The creed and the ecstasy are placed together as Browning would have them in these two stanzas:

" 'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh, that
 I seek

In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be
 A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
 Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever; a Hand like this
 hand

Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the Christ
 stand!"

I know not too well how I found my way home in the night.
 There were witnesses, cohorts about me, to left and to right,
 Angels, powers, the unuttered, unseen, the alive, the aware:
 I repressed, I got through them as hardly, as strugglingly
 there,

As a runner beset by the populace famished for news—
 Life or death, . . . But I fainted not,

For the Hand still impelled me at once and supported,
 suppressed

All the tumult, and quenched it with quiet, and holy behest,
 Till the rapture was shut in itself, and the earth sank to rest.

III

It remains only to touch on two or three of Browning's poems containing specific religious ideas. The first of these is *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*. There are here really two poems, each describing the events and reflecting the thoughts of a sacred day. The poems are attempts at understanding, not declarations of things understood. So considered, the value of *Christmas Eve* is a very practical one. Quite frankly, it is a picture of what goes on in an intellectually active man's mind as he sits in church and listens to a sermon. The non-Conformist chapel may be a dull place to him, and the congregation too easily satisfied with platitudes of truth; or the great cathedral may be packed with worshippers held breathless simply by the tinkling of the silver bell and the mystery of the Mass. Both may seem far from the skeptical man's idea of the actual rational truth. Yet as the sermon ends, or the host is lifted, Christ is made manifest. God is there, and the hungry worshippers are blest. The humor of the poem, appropriately tolerant, does not obscure the poet's conclusion:

God who registers the cup
 Of mere cold water, for his sake
 To a disciple rendered up,
 Disdains not his own thirst to slake
 At the poorest love was ever offered:
 And because my heart I proffered,
 With true love trembling at the brim,
 He suffers me to follow him
 Forever, my own way.

In *Easter Day* the issues lie deeper. Here the skeptic and the man of faith argue out the question. Can one believe in Christian revelation? The actual argument is between believing and living out one's belief. The skeptic holds that faith is

a practical necessity but a scientific uncertainty. Give a man a God in whom he can believe, and he will go to the end of the earth for Him:

Could I believe once thoroughly,
The rest were simple. What? Am I
An idiot, do you think?—a beast?
Prove to me, only that the least
Command of God is God's indeed,
And what injunction shall I need
To pay obedience?

But—the man of faith replies—the problem is not so simple as that. For there is a discrepancy between what even a wise man knows about the truth and what he does about it. This discrepancy amounts to an actual cleavage in concerns which involve both the religious and the secular life. The fact is that this earthly life cannot easily be fitted into the heavenly pattern. The order of nature does not of and by itself conform to the divine will. The man of faith—here probably Browning himself—says:

. . . could you joint
This flexible finite life once tight
Into the fixed and infinite,
You, safe inside, would spurn what's out,
With carelessness enough, no doubt.

There is a cleavage between flesh and spirit, think what man will. The natural man cannot perceive the will of God; so much the less can he do it. As for proof—the man who looks only for *it* will find it where he chooses to seek it. The man of faith falls back on the practical question of how a man living here on earth shall shape his life when, suddenly, a vision comes to him. At the apocalyptic hour he is surrounded by a sea of fire. It is his Day of Judgment. The truth is revealed to him. What if it be that he has loved earth, not God? The earth is a good place for the education of the soul. But a love of God involves a transformation, a renunciation, and a waiting. Heaven is the opening of the door to those who, while waiting, have not slept

The long poem closes on love's high level, the level of Calvary, as the Vision speaks, rebuking and pleading with man :

Now take love ! Well betide
Thy tardy conscience ! Haste to take
The show of love for the name's sake,
Remembering every moment Who,
Beside creating thee unto
These ends, and these for thee, was said
To undergo death in thy stead
In flesh like thine.

The poems *Cleon* and the *Epistle of Karshish* are Christian apologies cast in the form of imaginary letters. They interest us by their indirect approach to the study of the Christian faith, helping us to see how the early Christians were held in contempt as barbarous Jews or, simply, as queer people. To Cleon, Saint Paul is a barbarian ; to Karshish, Lazarus is an innocent dupe, the harmless victim of a delusion. Yet each critic is led to admit, in his own analysis, this essential truth of Christianity : that it effects a supernatural and spiritual regeneration in the life of the believer. In Paul it is a faith in immortality ; in Lazarus, a faith in the divinity of Christ. These great doctrines, Browning implies, are rejected on narrowly pagan grounds because they are too wonderful to believe, too good to be true. It is not possible to believe, even on the testimony of witnesses, in the confession of so great a belief—so say the skeptics. Yet these skeptics expect us to believe their quizzical doubting words. Browning says that the modern Christian will choose the more direct evidence.

The poem *A Death in the Desert* deals with the theme of the Christian faith through the ages. What will become of the wonder of this new faith in Christ in years to come, asks the aged St. John, when men who have not known Christ on earth will doubt what he, John, has heard and seen and written ? Now, as the Evangelist looks back on those wondrous days in Galilee and recalls the miracles and the words that fell from the Master's lips, he marvels that he endured the apocalyptic

vision and lived. But he did live, and he lives yet for a little while, in the story, to repeat the words:

It was so; so I heard and saw, . . .
I saw, I heard, I knew.

But now that time has passed since then and John is old, men say: "It is getting long ago: Where is the promise of His coming?" Soon, after a century or two, others will be asking:

Was John at all, and did he say he saw?
Assure us, ere we ask what he might see!

Such, the poet implies, is the toll the years take of our spiritual history. How can Christian revelation stand against the tyranny of time? Flesh and blood are in time's range. Men taste their joys and bitterness and remember, because the self-same pain is renewed each generation. But the word of God was spoken—once for all time—by the eternally generated Christ. It is confirmed by the Holy Spirit but not again made flesh. Can the world live forever on this once spoken Word of God? Or as the centuries pass, will men doubt and say again:

Was John at all, and did he say he saw? . . .
—Saw with his eyes and handled with his hands
That which was from the first, the Word of Life.
How will it be when none more saith
"I saw?"

The answer is that man, living *in* time, must learn to live by the truth that is revealed *above* and *through* time. He must live expectantly and wait, guiltless of the sin of the "unlit lamp and the ungirt loin"; and, with eyes illumined by the light from above, he must learn to see through the screen of flesh—as did Christopher Smart who, as Browning said,

. . . pierced the screen
'Twixt thing and word, lit language straight from soul,—
Left no fine film-flake on the naked coal
Live from the censor.

John, in whose sight the Lord had been transfigured, had fled from the garden at Jesus' arrest; but, as by a fire from heaven, he had come to see again and to know. Doubt is only a part of the divine-human process of learning. It is—the figure here is ours, not Browning's—like the outer dry branch of a growing tree. By its drying and falling the living tree is pruned and made fruitful. Old beliefs, once fresh and green, now cleave as dry doubts to faith's living tree. But at its uppermost tip where it points to heaven the tree is sun-kissed and fresh, and from that tip to its root a life current passes to and fro, making the fibre hard and the branches stalwart and strong. So is our life thrust upward by faith, as by the law of divine grace, toward Christ who is at its root and at its branches' end. God wills that we should live and grow. Of the skyward end of that tree of life—which in the Apocalypse of John is spoken of as planted on the crystal river's bank—we stand in awe, looking with eager hope into the face of the sun. Of that great end's certainty, says Browning, our whole being speaks aloud, and the dead speak forever to us, as St. John still speaks, lying, "as he lay once, breast to breast with God."

In its serene altitude, this is also the theme of *Rabbi Ben Ezra*. It represents the soul at its earthly maturity. In life's storm there is to be no more tugging at the roots, no more spreading of the branches. It is evening, the world is calm, the sky spacious and clear. A roseate sunset is limning the west. Life, in saintly old age, shows itself complete. The saintly man stands for a little while between the past and the future, between earth and heaven. He has come to a resting place on his journey. Looking back, he reflects on life's meaning. If he has doubted, his doubt has been a lifelong sign to him that he is neither brute nor clod. If he has fretted, the spirit has been kept alive in him; if he has failed, it is because he has striven; if he is imperfect, it is proof that he awaits his perfection. And this waiting is now his task, and bliss. He will be patient. He will summon others to this "youth's heritage"; he will teach men, still at work and yet in middle age, how God shapes human lives here on earth, as a potter shapes a pitcher at the wheel. Ah! there he has found the perfect figure to express the great

truth; the ancient poet-prophet has given it to him. Man is a vessel of clay into which God has put his divine spirit. Soon, at death's summons to heaven's marriage feast, the Master himself will pour for him the wine of an immortal life. That is the hour he awaits as he says:

Look not thou down but up!
To uses of a cup,
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,
The new wine's foaming flow,
The Master's lips aglow!
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what needst thou with earth's
wheel?

It has by now been shown that Browning had more to say of immortality than of history. The immortal spirit in him strove mightily in the flesh, through the flesh, and beyond the flesh. He was the strong man's poet, not frail humanity's. Like Shakespeare he could not interest himself in mere throngs of men; they blurred the text for him and blotted out the sharp edge of his commentary. But let a man be singled out, one man or one woman, and what he saw made his heart leap. The individual might be a conspicuous artist like Andrea Del Sarto, an obscure scholar like the Grammarian, or a young Italian girl like Pompilia or Pippa. It was enough that he heard one clear voice. In it he heard his own soul's summons and felt himself for that moment glorified. All this does not deny that Browning enjoyed the common fellowship of men. He was socially popular, liked people, and revelled in good company. As a man and an Englishman he was a good "mixer." But as a poet he was a master of identity.

In this magnificent individualism lay Browning's final limitation. He was, at last, the poet of the chosen few. The Christian faith was a great reality to him; but he was not, like Dante, a systematic theological poet. It was sufficient for him that his thinking was honestly and confessedly Christian. Like St. Paul, Browning knew what and in whom he believed. Listening, one hears the clear echo of the words of Second Timothy iv:7 in the poem *Prospice*, in which he says:

I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
The best and the last!
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes and forebore,
And bade me creep past.

Without looking in Browning for the traditional signs of Christian orthodoxy, we are content to accept him as he is and to leave him where he stands, self-revealed in the *Epilogue of Asolando* (published on the day of the poet's death) as

One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would
triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake.

Reading Browning is like a day's sailing on deep blue waters. One must be born for sailing, skillful and ready. It is no hour of leisurely boating along in some sheltered chosen cove, but a day of brisk wind and a journey away from the familiar shore. Almost before you know it, the bellying sails hurl you forward into the salt spray. The ship moves amain into the swelling sea. There is no time, nor mood, for commonplace conversation. Attention and skill are needed for the craftsman's art. For with Browning at the rudder the poem may take a quick turn and carry you to the crest of a high wave of thought, or hurl you headlong into the mist of obscurity. Clouds may gather, scudding along the sky and the sea; dark clouds may form, ominous and enigmatic before you as you read. For the first time in your life you will find that the reading of poetry may be hard work. You may weary of it—of such a literary journey—feel the strain of it on your patience, your endurance. A day in the wind and the sun, and the strong taste of the salt sea, may be too much for you. You may beg to be taken ashore or into quiet waters.

But if you are brave and patient, Browning will bring you safe to land. That is the joy of sailing with him. He enjoys grappling with elemental forces, with doubt, with moral prob-

lems, with unusual situations. But he is sure of his skill and his destination. And when the day's sailing ends, and you see the sun setting in the west in clouds full and quiet and rich with the sun's gold, you will say: "Today I have lived, I have known a poet, and I am a wiser and a blest man."

Chapter 7

EMERSON

We cannot think of Emerson apart from the American scene. He is a part of the New England topography; and as we read a little distance into him we note how distinctly he belongs to Boston and Cambridge and Concord, and to the surrounding region. The people who lived there a hundred years ago are still alive in his essays, and walk with him in the fields and down the street. But his influence does not extend only across New England. Like Walt Whitman, whose arrival he hailed, he follows the pioneer westward—a pilgrim seeking a new country, an ardent nature-lover, a native scholar, an original philosopher, and a poet. Today Emerson, more than any other American man of letters, holds the title to our nation's richest mine of thought. He is still our wisest, sanest, and most representative man of vision.

I

Emerson's personality was striking. In it there was a combination of the Puritan Yankee and the Greek Olympian. The vast horizon of his spirit astonished his contemporaries,—more, perhaps, than he does some moderns who are inclined to be annoyed that they do not find him sufficiently meticulous, secretarial, and self-explanatory. He saw the Everywhere in the commonest thing at his feet. Most characteristic and immediately noticeable was the fact that his thinking began where he was—with neighborly people, with nature around him, and with the soil.

Primarily, it is for this relation of nature to the poet, to the essential man for whom the poet is the spokesman, that Emerson has something to tell us. What he says is startlingly real and intimate, and like the finding of a lost jewel it is both an

awakening surprise and a familiar recognition. What Emerson actually does is to remove the scales from our eyes in order that we may see the objects of nature in their close companionship with us. Just as it is the soul itself that contemplates the object, remote yet present in it—and here Emerson follows Plato—so Nature is present in the living creature, not merely as a vital force or passion, but transcendently, a divine consciousness and a revelation. Purposely using homely language, Emerson says in the essay on *Nature*:

The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title.

There is, says Emerson, no here or there among the birches. None of the stones says: "This is my ground." And the poet, whose eyes no veil of shadow dims, knows this spacious freedom. He hears no forbidding voice. Nothing fears him. The trees wave their branches for him; the wheat stems laugh with him as he walks among them. It is no folly of his imagination that makes him greet them in return. And when the poet writes, he does not conjure up things to say of nature, or read what is not actually there and so commit what John Ruskin has called the *pathetic fallacy*—the act of assuming that the gentian is not blue except as the eye perceives it to be so. Instead there exists the actual power of the object of nature to produce the sensation, and the actual power of the mind of the poet to receive it, to transform it into an image, and to make this image the pattern and the sign of the meaning of things in the world.

By this sane act, the poet becomes the true maker of things. And so it is that a landscape is a work of man's art. Nature itself is elemental, impersonal: it is mineral and vegetable and animal existence. The gentian is blue, the sky is gray. But there is no *meaning* in these colors; they are only phenomena. It is man's essential soul that gives them meaning. And this

element called "soul" is not merely an ingredient added to nature by man to please himself, or to delude him into believing that nature is generous and humane when it is not. Rather, it is proof that man holds the key to nature and that the poet is one who knows how to open the mysterious door. It means, too, that the worth of nature is subordinate to the worth of man. Emerson, insisting that the power to give pleasure exists less in nature than in the human spirit, says :

Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. To a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then, there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population.

Nature is man's daily companion. She lives with him, is sometimes recalcitrant but never faithless. The wind brings the rain; the rain feeds the grain; the grain invites the harvest. The apple tree is a maid and a mother every season. A man's orchard is his rich and fertile spouse. If nature is sometimes severe, she is an impartial mother. She disciplines her children without show of pride or favor. The seasons are her fine instruments. Spring is her smile; winter, her chastening rod. Against the perverse in man she is like the voice of judgment, inexorably firm, obdurately just. The lawbreaker finds himself surprised, thwarted, and at last undone. Emerson states this truth of natural justice, as he sees it, in these words :

Winters know
Easily to shed the snow,
And the untaught Spring is wise
In cowslips and anemonies.
Nature, hating art and pains,
Baulks and baffles plotting brains;
Casualty and Surprise
Are the apples of her eyes;
But she dearly loves the poor,
And, by marvel of her own,
Strikes the loud pretender down.

But Emerson sees in nature not only man's nourishing, disciplining mother. She is also the exemplary artist. Her ways are just, though her moods are variable. She is constant, but no man's slave; consistent, but no one's imitator. She acts ever, but never only repetitiously. Nature is virginal, and ready at life's wheel, spin as it may:

She is gamesome and good,
But of mutable mood,—
No dreary repeater now and again,
She will be all things to all men.
She who is old, but nowise feeble,
Pours her power into the people,
Merry and manifold without bar,
Makes and moulds them what they are,
And what they call their city way
Is not their way, but hers,
And what they say they made today,
They learned of the oaks and firs. . . .
What's most theirs is not their own,
But borrowed in atoms from iron and stone,
And in their vaunted works of Art
The master-stroke is still her part.

But nature is like a ladder. There are steps of ascent toward its destiny. Emerson points out four of them. We may call them (1) usefulness, (2) beauty, (3) symbolism, (4) spirit. We have already spoken of nature's uses: she is a lovely child, a sweet consort, a wise mother, and an original genius. Emerson gives to this quality of usefulness the name *Commodity*. Of beauty, he says, nature is replete. The very name *Cosmos*, used by us to indicate the world, was among the Greeks of old also the synonym for beauty. It is a noble trait in man to see the world thus nobly made. Man finds delight in looking at a blade of grass, a bird, a mountain, a star. Is this pleasure wholly in the light that nature sheds on things and has beforehand placed in the seer's eye? What is this strange grace that invests with beauty the shapes of common things: "the acorn, the grape, the pine-cone, the wheat-ear, the egg, the wings and forms of most birds, the lion's claw, the serpent, the butterfly,

sea-shells, flames, clouds, buds, leaves, and the forms of many trees, as the palm"? Emerson answers, and says:

. . . if eyes were made for seeing
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being.

Yet the question persists: Are not the seer and the thing seen lighted by one torch? Does not one flame burn in both the beholder and the beheld, the lover and the one loved? Emerson holds that all life is one, and one with God. Near the end of the essay on Nature he says:

. . . the Supreme Being does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws at his need inexhaustible power.

Emerson has much to say of the moral beauty of this strength that goes out of us. It is something from within moving outward toward the world of men. The graceful expression of a thought in words; a walk across the field to greet a friend; the cup of charity given to the beggar; all deeds that spring from Christian love; all silent suffering for a high cause; all acts of men who follow willingly, not wholly understanding why, the voice of the high authority of a religious faith—to these is given the title of beautiful, the crown of character. Emerson sums up the thought for us in the words: "Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue." As natural action is graceful, so moral action is an expression of grace, but of a higher order; it is a sign of divine grace manifest in the earthly conduct of man.

Of this greater work of divine grace Emerson, we admit, gives us hints rather than specific information. Religious thinking, with him, serves a philosophical rather than a theological purpose. He reasons from spirit to nature, and from nature to spirit; and his reasoning, in that vertical realm, is prophetic and clear. But of that more concrete reasoning which begins with the Gospel record of divine revelation and moves on the horizontal level of the life of mankind through history, Emer-

son has a less firm and extensive command. He knows men and loves what is great in them. The place he gives to Christ is not redemptive-historical, but cosmic-human. It is the place of a world hero, as he is shown to us in the oft-quoted line associating in close equality "the Lord Christ's heart and Shakespeare's strain."

Theologically, Emerson is a free-thinking Unitarian. The Cross and the Sacraments have to him only a figurative meaning. They are, he holds, more properly a poet's means of speech than a supernatural means of grace. Sin is a defect in nature which a strong spirit will purge and heal. It is clear, therefore, that in going to Emerson we must take him for what he is, namely, a philosophical and not a theological poet. So understood, he is one of the world's inspiring writers, a man of unusual genius and soul.

We have thus far spoken of Emerson's conception of nature as usefulness and beauty. It now remains to interpret the additional qualities of symbolism and spirit.

Symbolism is seen by Emerson to be the poet's essential language. It is his way of getting hold of his own thought, a line let down into the well of his being whence the words, as drops of water drawn from the heart, are poured forth at the surface—evidence of unfathomed depths within the nature of man. Nature, too, is itself the language of the creative spirit in the universe and in man. Natural objects are symbols of spiritual truths. The created world exists as the expressed word of God. The poet, therefore, working first with words, and then with nature as symbolism, is exploring the resources of the human spirit, and beyond it the mind of God himself.

Words and things alike, as Emerson sees them, are emblematic. The entire outer world is one of pictures. The realities are hidden. Their unseen center is the soul. From that center, calm and complete and consistent with itself, thoughts move outward into things, arbitrarily called *nature*, and into works of art, called poems. The normal child, close to reality and to nature, talks in words that are poetic. If you tell the child that God made the dark clouds, he will say that the thunder he hears is God talking. So, when we are told that God speaks

and man hears, we are listening to the words of a poet. Poetry, then, is a type of revelation, a lifting of the curtain between the soul and the world.

And here, in the *Essay on Nature*, we see the shortcoming of Emerson's teaching. He presses the symbolism so far as to make of nature not the outward sign but the essential truth of his gospel. He does not say, as for example we read in the Gospel parable, that "the Kingdom of heaven is *like* a sower who went out to sow." Instead, he writes:

What is a farm but a mute gospel? The chaff and the wheat, weeds and plants, blight, rain, insects, sun,—it is sacred emblem from the first furrow of spring to the last stack which the snow of winter overtakes in the fields.

To Emerson, nature seems actually to be divine. Her aspect, he says in the *Essay*, is devout: "Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head, and hands folded upon the breast."

In reality, the seed of divine truth is not sown in nature or, through nature, in the world. The gospel parable is an analogy. It draws a parallel between two orders of things, letting the truth of the order of nature reflect the higher truth of the order of the supernatural. Jesus Himself said that the field was the world; that the seed was the truth of the Kingdom in the world. This kingdom is not simply nature impregnated with the seed of the spirit. If it were, the kingdom, compelled to follow nature's order, would forever carry the divine seed with it into death, and so remain forever static. What we learn from the Gospels, and from Christian history, is that the Kingdom of God is the Church of Christ through the ages—the never-dying seedbed of the eternal seed of truth.

In justice, we must take Emerson as he is. When he speaks of *nature* and *spirit*, he does not mean the redemption of man and this natural world by the divine regenerative spirit of God, as this doctrine is represented to us in the Gospels, in the Christian sacraments, and in the historical institution of the church. He means, rather, the complete filling up and absorption of nature by the divine indwelling spirit. This unorthodox

teaching, set side by side with the theology of Christian redemption, clearly defines Emerson's position. Yet it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that, like the Platonism from which it is mainly derived, this Emersonian doctrine of divine immanence has so closely attached itself to our Christian tradition as to be almost a part of our modern religious heritage. As an example of this fact, consider these words of Emerson as a test of our responsiveness to them:

The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. . . . In the uttermost meaning of the words, thought is devout, and devotion is thought. Deep calls unto deep. But in actual life, the marriage is not celebrated. . . . Is not prayer also a study of truth,—a sally of the soul into the unfound infinite? No man ever prayed heartily without learning something. But when a faithful thinker, resolute to detach every object from personal relations and to see it in the light of thought, shall, at the same time, kindle science with the fire of the holiest affections, then will God go forth anew into His creation.

II

On this summer morning, before the open window, the berry branches stand in a tangled row. Their fruit is rich and full since the rain, and their thorns glisten on the ruddy stalk. We shall pick them presently, thinking, doubtless, on the problem of good and evil. Armored in protective corduroy, standing among the formidable bushes, and reaching for the sweet berries, we shall attack the thorny question. Perhaps, in Concord, not far from the historic bridge, the thought of it had been running through Emerson's mind when he composed the little poem *Berrying*:

'May be true what I had heard,—
Earth's a howling wilderness,
Truculent with fraud and force,'
Said I, strolling through the pastures,
And along the river-side.

Caught among the blackberry vines,
Feeding on the Ethiops sweet,
Pleasant fancies overtook me.
I said, 'What influence me preferred,
Elect, to dreams thus beautiful?'
The vines replied, 'And didst thou deem
No wisdom from our berries went?'

If a man can still dream of man's worth, he will find, says Emerson, a just cause for his dream in looking on a ripe berry or a fresh blade of grass. Innocency, calm, and endurance are inviolately written on nature. The thorns and the fruit grow in order there, together on one green stalk.

But man, we must ruefully say to Emerson, is a violator; and the reason is that his innocency is gone from him. He is himself a bruised plant; his life is crushed within him, and his existence has turned to sorrow. In the familiar figure, for man living is passing through the wine press. So now, when he acts, it is in weakness; when he is strong, it is by a strength that is not his own. Aware of this fact, one recalls Pascal's saying that man is a thinking reed and Shelley's poignant allusion to the thorns of life on which he fell and bled.

Pressed for the answer to the question of why it is so, one is forced to repeat what the Gospels teach, that man is in sin. Therefore he sins and, by his labor to extricate himself, he builds, age after age, a road of sharp stones, a path of thorns for his wearying feet. It is not in *nature* itself but in its divine redemption that our Christian faith is grounded. We confess to nature's sympathizing and healing power. But the curse lies deeper. To nature, in our extremity, we are driven to repeat the age-old mocking admonition: "Physician, heal thyself." Only an act of God can avail to take away the sting of sin.

Of this confession of our Christian faith Emerson had a sufficiently clear knowledge. His father and grandfather before him had been theologically educated. But his reaction to Puritanism was strong; and the rationalism of the eighteenth century, together with the new evolutionary science of the

nineteenth century, definitely influenced his religious thought. Not forgetting Emerson's originality, we may say that his religious philosophy, in the main, is reducible to these two historic influences: his philosophy of *spirit*, to rationalism; his philosophy of *nature*, to evolutionary science. His deistic belief in a Supreme Reason that guided the destiny of mankind in a naturalistic world was richly augmented by certain Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas and by Asiatic thought. At its center, his religious thinking was mystical; at its circumference, transcendental. Its basic idea was the oneness of all things expressed in the word *soul*. Nature, Emerson held, was the fluid expression of spirit. All nature, summed up in the outer world, was emblematic of God. Things he believed to be the shadows of thoughts. Mind alone was ultimately real. This unreality of the phenomenal world to Emerson is well illustrated in the story told about a woman who supposedly came to him in great agitation, saying: "Mr. Emerson, the world is coming to an end!" To which Emerson replied: "Be composed, madam, I can get on very well without it." This in turn recalls the remark made by Emerson one day while carrying in wood: "I suppose we must do this as if it were real."

In reading Emerson, we do not so much find ourselves giving attention to his theology as listening to his voice of prophecy. It is his own authentic word that we hear. He speaks to us individually, originally, wisely, as a man among men, as a man *thinking*. It is by that title, we recall, that he hails the American scholar. A man must know himself and be himself, said Emerson in his 1837 Phi Beta Kappa address. To be himself he must be an individual man, not a multifarious functionary. He must call home his powers from their activities—as the hand calls in the fingers—and hold fast to the oneness of his being, the centrality and integrity of the *self*, the soul. The farmer, the teacher, the builder—these together, and many others, constitute Man; just as the arm, the finger, the head and the foot, help to form the body. How grotesque it is to dismember man socially, we hear Emerson say, and to see him exhibited a monstrosity—a leg walking without a body.

Emerson sums up the truth, as he sees it—letting the light of Asia fall on it, and adding to it the touch of Platonism—in the poem *Each and All*, in which he says:

Little thinks, in the field, yon red-cloaked clown
Of thee from the hill-top looking down;
The heifer that lows in the upland farm,
Far-heard, lows not thine ear to charm;
The sexton, tolling his bell at noon,
Deems not that great Napoleon
Stops his horse, and lists with delight,
Whilst his files sweep round yon Alpine height;
Nor knowest thou what argument
Thy life to thy neighbor's creed has lent.
All are needed by each one;
Nothing is fair or good alone.

. . . I said: "I covet truth;
Beauty is unripe childhood's cheat;
I leave it behind with the games of youth;"—
As I spoke, beneath my feet
The ground-pine curled its pretty wreath,
Running over the club-moss burrs;
I inhaled the violet's breath;
Around me stood the oaks and firs;
Pine-cones and acorns lay on the ground;
Over me soared the eternal sky,
Full of light and of deity;
Again I saw, again I heard,
The rolling river, the morning bird;—
Beauty through my senses stole;
I yielded myself to the perfect whole.

Man is not alone, Emerson tells us again and again. Cohorts of angels surround him; he is enveloped in a cloud of witnesses; a myriad feet walk by his side. How can we say that we breathe and think alone? Speech is communal, social, universal. Song flows from voice to voice, from heart to heart. Man is no more alone on earth than are the islands of the sea. Each island has its identity, but a little below the ocean's surface all the islands are one. They do not merely belong to the

earth; they are the earth's expressive members, hands reaching out of the sea to the sun. So every human hand that is lifted to the sun is my hand, and yours. There is a communal life which the tree-tops in the forest know and which illustrates the oneness of us all on the higher levels of our being. There, where the branches touch the sky, no tree is singled out, though as men walk below they know and name the individual oak or elm.

It is likewise so with the spiritual life that emanates *from* a man. One strong man is a central and a creative force in the universe. The centrifugal power in him is equal to the centripetal, balances it, and makes his soul a dynamo of energy, indefatigable, yet tranquil and calm. Whatever direction nature goes and spirit takes in the world, he is their gravitating center; and when he acts as man, and not merely as mechanic—when not only his hand, but he himself, moves—both spirit and nature act in him, rise and go forth from him in thoughts and deeds of creativity.

Instances of this fact multiply to commend Emerson's view to us. The Alpine Rhone, tempestuous and foaming, obeys the glacier reclining calm and aloof, like a monarch, in the mountain ravine. The giant oak that I see from my study window dominates the ground on which it stands. No man has ever seen its roots; but the entire community feels its influence. By its command the large boughs hold their leaves through the Michigan winter. Squirrels make it their village their lives long, often going on a journey to a topmost branch. Acorns fall and spring up again as seedlings in the lawn's shady corners. Late last winter, looking up, one might see the birds' nests, untenanted but safe in its dusky arms. The birds, once nestlings, were the emissaries of this living home. Like the squirrels, their natural enemies, they knew and obeyed one law: they recognized the security and the boundary of their own little world.

It is so with the central outgoing life of a man. He is an entire city carrying its life about with him. In him live natural inimical forces, but he is greater than any or all of them—spirits good and evil, antagonistic ideas, opposing wills, conflicting passions. Man himself is not the sum of these diverse powers, nor the prey of their hungry strife. Like winds, they

blow in him and through him; but he is more than these winds. He is ocean and land and sky—all, by comparison, that a planet can be in this universe. It is out of him that cities rise to become great seaports. These cities say that man is hungry and wants to be fed; they say that he is a caged gull that wants to get out to sea. A library, at its foundation, is a man thinking. Books are seeds scattered in the earth by the prolific brain. No reader should pick up and prize alike every book. Some books produce thistles, having themselves sprung from beds of weeds. The best books, says Emerson, are not identical with the best minds, do not exhaust or fully represent them. Books, too, are fingers, reaching, grasping, giving; the hand is more than they; and the body is more than the hand.

By some such key as this, Emerson opens his mind to us. His teachings defy analysis. They present no logical outline. He offers no criticism of life comparable, for example, to that of Matthew Arnold. Emerson is an inspired commentator. His utterances have the sufficiency of genius; and we work in vain with him, I have found, when we seek to cast what he thinks into a system. Reading one of his essays is like going into a magnificent rose garden. Every variety is represented: the white pointed Caledonia; the long-stemmed Los Angeles; the Madame Butterfly, pink and yellow-tinted at the base of the petals; the President Hoover, dazzling and fragrant; the Radiance; the Talisman. Everyone of them is its own kind of rose; but generically they are of one family. All of Emerson's thoughts have one root. In reading him, therefore, it is best to avoid the vexatious thorns and to enjoy the feast.

III

Genius, said Emerson, is religious. No man of deep insight can look on the world without seeing his own soul; and he cannot contemplate God without knowing himself to be divine. "Man is a stream whose source is hidden." That is why, Emerson continues, in the *Over-Soul*,

When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see
not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a

Pensioner; not a cause but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire and look up and put myself in the attitude of reception,—but from some alien energy the visions come.

This hope that runs through a man like a river, is it not of God, the sign of man's birth on some high mountain and of the cataract loosed from his ancestral blood? Emerson then asks, is not the source greater than the stream? And does not this river of hope in us push on beyond where we stand and into the future, preparing for us the green valleys in which we shall one day live? In the mundane sense, history is but the record of old hopes given up for new ones, old cities left behind, still standing on the river's bank, not forgotten but passed by with the historian's feeling of nostalgia set against his knowledge of ruthless time. And what is this nostalgic feeling in us but the overshadowing of time by eternity? All this is too much to contemplate without religious faith. Even the skeptic's little hard words that dash against heaven, like pellets of ice against a window pane, are an affirmation of more than a vegetative life in him. They affirm that his mind is not of stone; his will not all water; his passions not loose blown sand.

Emerson somewhere declares that all sincere conversation is worship; what is not sincere is incoherent gibberish, parading behind the symbolism of truth. The lie is blasphemy. At best, our talk is of parts of truth, parts of ourselves. We know more, says Emerson, than we can say; we are more than we can act. What mature individual, after the most earnest talk among equals, has not felt the eloquent power of a wise silence? Lesser men fret in their misshapen conceptions; wise men, knowing that they do not see all of truth, compose their warring thoughts and cultivate the tranquil mind.

We are aware of a kind of destiny, Emerson reminds us; but we do not know it by the name of God. Do we not all too often think of it as a blind force stalking behind us rather than as a divine light shining on our way ahead? It would be worth a day's serious thought to learn how changed our lives would be if, instead of shuddering in the grip of fate, we lived one

day by faith in the sheltering hand of a divine providence. Instead of finding ourselves driven down a narrowing road into a maze of dark sharp corners, what if we were to see the walls taken away, the barriers lifted, the crooked course made straight, and the gracious justice and power of the Divine Spirit given a free and regenerative course in our lives? That, we say critically, is the fancied picture of an ideal. But Emerson's answer is that an ideal, reasonably conceived, is but the full measure of what the soul surmises. The soul, "sporting with time," as Emerson says,

Can crowd eternity into an hour,
Or stretch an hour to eternity.

Evil, Emerson holds, is not to be ignored as if it were non-existent. It is to be resolved into good, dissolved as the dark cloud is dissolved in the sun, and the muddy pool is resolved into summer dew. How else, if not by the divine spirit, is evil at last to be overcome? Or, are good and evil to be accepted alike as endless, and to be allowed to force us into a hopeless dualism?

It is true that the conflict between good and evil did not profoundly disturb Emerson. His mind was transcendently secure against the clash of wills among evil men. Our modern age might perhaps have made him restless. Living in it, he would have been too honest and gifted with insight to ignore any facts. Those who believe that he could not ever look on life realistically, that he was always dreaming dreams, that he had no knowledge of theology and no sense of humor, should read from his essay *Experience*, in which, to take only one example, he says:

Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads . . . Of what use (is it) to make heroic vows of amendment, if the same old law-breaker is to keep them? . . . What cheer can the religious sentiment yield, when that is suspected to be secretly dependent on the seasons of the year and the state of the blood? I knew a witty physician who found the creed in the

biliary duct, and used to affirm that if there was disease in the liver, the man became a Calvinist, and if that organ was sound, he became a Unitarian. . . . We look at (persons); they seem alive, and we presume there is impulse in them. In the moment it seems impulse; in the year, in the lifetime, it turns out to be a certain uniform tune which the revolving barrel of the music-box must play. Men resist the conclusion in the morning, but adopt it as the evening wears on, that temper prevails over everything of time, place and condition, and is inconsumable in the flames of religion. . . . On the platform of physics . . . temperament puts all divinity to rout.

Emerson was not the dupe of cherished illusions. He was too sane for that; one half of him was always the sagacious Yankee, while the other half was the celestial prophet. It was a sign of greatness in Emerson that the prophet in him was generally able to give the answers to the questions which the Yankee asked.

Yet it is true, though Emerson knew and felt the influence of men like St. Paul and St. Augustine, that he seems to have preferred Plato to them; and he was always more the poet than the historian. His mind was on ideas rather than on events. The facts of history were not ignored; they were telescoped into one another, the lesser into the greater, until the time element in them was reduced and all but disappeared. What happened in a year or a day was, as the day or the year, a passing thing, a fragment of reality. Vice, crime, and bloodshed were what they were: evils to be endured, to be fought. For instance, Emerson clearly saw slavery for what it was and set himself against it—though he was not a radical abolitionist, and chided his friend Channing in the *Ode*:

What boots thy zeal,
O glowing friend,
That would indignant rend
The northland from the south?
Wherefore? to what good end?
Boston Bay and Bunker Hill
Would serve things still; . . .

The horseman serves the horse,
 The neatherd serves the neat,
 The merchant serves the purse,
 The eater serves his meat;
 'Tis the day of the chattel,
 Web to weave, and corn to grind;
 Things are in the saddle,
 And ride mankind.

We are forced to admit that Emerson is not blind to mundane realities. His highest thoughts seem habitually to associate themselves with things of this earth. In a unique and natural order of progression, he takes into his scope a piece of ground and its fruitfulness: the bluejay on the lawn, and the hollyhocks in the garden; the trade and the destiny of cities; and America's future history, hidden in the soil, in men unborn, in the springs of inspiration open for poets, and in the river of religious faith running through the land like the great Mississippi. There are touches in his poem *The World-Soul* which move us less as poetry, perhaps, than as sheer reality:—touches on America's pulse, glimpses of beauty unblemished by corruption, of the land's unfathomed wealth, its material prosperity, the Prairies slowly conquered, the Rockies traversed, the golden West Coast settled; and then, over and above these outward signs, there passes before us the poet's vision of the spirit of destiny, merciful but inexorable, the Angel of Providence, judge of men and history, inconceivably patient, self-assured and sovereign, as Emerson pictures him:

Yet there in the parlor sits
 Some figure of noble guise,—
 Our angel, in a stranger's form,
 Or woman's pleading eyes;
 Or only a flashing sunbeam
 In at the window-pane;
 Or Music pours on mortals
 Its beautiful disdain. . . .

Still, still the secret presses;
The nearing clouds draw down;
The crimson morning flames into
The fopperies of the town.

Reading through the essay *The Over-Soul* is like an invitation to live. One closes one's *Emerson* with a desire to take a deep breath. It has been like going into the garden while the odor of mint is in the morning air. Perhaps it has rained, and the bush is now in that state of enrapt stillness so emblematic of what Emerson has just said. One looks at the sprig intently, seeking to ascertain its hidden, its essential, nature. How beyond discernment its life unfolds, twig on twig: its green leaves, serrated and delicately veined; the leaf's zigzag contour; its sinuous sturdy stem; the hidden wonder of its winter-resisting root. Beyond its own artistry, its own logic, its own creatureliness, this flower, like a language, has a higher use. It is a hieroglyph, a symbol or picture writing, which spells out to those who can read it the meaning of the world.

Unlike such giants among his predecessors as Dante, Shakespeare, or Milton, Emerson does not see the antithesis or cleavage that exists in the world between the divine spirit in man and his fallen nature. Sin to him is not a hard dividing fact, cutting through the whole nature of man, entering into his will, separating him from himself so that he becomes a lost soul. Emerson views life as already perfected; his thoughts go forward, making the terrestrial foreshadow the celestial. Looking on the bitter truth of what we see, we shake our heads, doubtful of his transcendental dream. The world, we say realistically, is not yet filled to overflowing with the World-Soul.

Against this claim there is but one answer. It is Emerson's genius of giving a supreme attractiveness to the good life. His own nobility of soul is finally illustrated in the poem *Terminus*, on which his son has left us this interesting note: "In the last days of the year 1866 . . . I met my father in New York just starting for his usual winter lecturing trip . . . We spent the night together at the St. Denis Hotel, and as we sat by the fire,

he read me two or three of his poems . . . among them *Terminus*. It almost startled me. No thought of his ageing had ever come to me, and there he sat, with no apparent abatement of bodily vigor, and young in spirit, recognizing with serene acquiescence his failing forces; I think he smiled as he read. He recognized, as none of us did, that his working days were nearly done." The poem closes with these lines:

As the bird trims her to the gale,
I trim myself to the storm of time,
I man the rudder, reef the sail,
Obey the voice at eve obeyed at prime:
 "Lowly faithful, banish fear,
 Right onward drive unharmed;
 The port, well worth the cruise, is near,
 And every wave is charmed."

Chapter 8

T. S. ELIOT

History is not the indubitable record of all past facts. More modestly, and more profoundly, it is the search for the thread of purpose that runs through events. When viewed on the secular level only, the writing of history bears resemblance to Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*. Cast between the two opposite extremes of chronology and fiction, historians may well despair of finding truth.

A modern popular writer, apparently tempted to burn his shelf of "Lives," asks:¹ "What is history? . . . Napoleon . . . said that it was a fable agreed upon. Ben Franklin said that 'historians relate not so much what is done, as what they have believed' . . . Samuel Johnson called history a shallow stream of thought. Chesterfield said it was a confused heap of facts . . . Herbert Spencer spoke of it as a mass of worthless gossip." These skeptical views set the stage for T. S. Eliot who, in a penetrating poem, pictures a man he calls Sweeney, fat and in pink health, but living on the level of an orangoutang while the world for whose pleasures he bargains with his money becomes a place of desolation. Thinking of him, the poet says, in testing irony:

The lengthened shadow of a man
Is history, said Emerson
Who had not seen the silhouette
Of Sweeney straddled in the sun.²

¹ Malcolm Bingay: Detroit Free Press, February 12, 1943.

² All quotations from the works of T. S. Eliot are printed by permission of the publisher, Harcourt, Brace & Co., Inc. They appear in *Collected Poems 1909-1935* (1934, 1936), *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), and *The Rock* (1934).

I

Viewed solely as *nature*, man's life on earth is simply a progress toward mortality. So regarded, it becomes an agony of frustration offering little relief except in complete sophistication. In bare sight before men's eyes, nature seems to turn upon itself in endless cycles; and the naturalistic mind, caught in its cycle, can do nothing but follow the onrush of organic forces and end in a contemplation of dust and ashes. Thus things that were meant to endure perish; thoughts break off at their nodes on the stem from which they were meant to thrust forth new life, shrivel up like worm-bitten leaves and fall to the ground.

No writer in our time has expressed this concept more starkly than T. S. Eliot. The vapid optimism that in a day's testing turns to dust and the vacuous thinking that under the pressure of concentration collapses like a puffball are vividly presented to us by the poet in his early poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. In it an age, and a half-dead and lost world's outlook, are personified in a frustrated man.

Prufrock is the picture of a man given over to despair, only half caring, and rummaging in the recesses of his mind as if it were an old book. It is evening. He has walked the streets that, "like a tedious argument," have brought him where he is. He once had visions, until he began to revise them. Now he has only his indecisions. Everything in him and about him turns around about itself like

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes.

Like a wraith of smoke in October, Prufrock himself moves about in lethargy, his mind curling hazily about the question of the meaning of life, fingering the toast and tea, measuring out his life, as he says, with coffee spoons, digressing half pleasurably, following the perfume from a dress into the room where

. . . the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

He once had visions. But he let the matter fall. It was not through fear but lack of care that he let the large question go unanswered. The reason was that faith was dead in him. Shuffling among his dry thoughts he found nothing but these questions: "Do I dare disturb the universe? . . . Shall I part my hair behind? . . . Do I dare to eat a peach?" His conclusion about himself is just. Though all else is dead within him, he retains the rational faculty, the last mechanical weapon of the frustrated man. It hammers out the words against his hollow brain, telling him that he is not a Prince Hamlet, but

. . . an easy tool,

Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

Here, says Eliot, is a portrait of the decadent, modern, secular-minded man. He is depicted with his thoughts at dead center. Like fog and smoke, his worldly hopes curl themselves about his bank or farm or shop; they envelop his mind, absorb his heart, only to wither with his best days, leaving him bereft, with the echo in his ears of his childhood dreams. It is the sad lot of the man who has counted his life by years, bank accounts, tally votes, and public self-display. Prufrock was once young; his hopes were high. But now the ashes through which his feet shuffle at forty are all that remain as we see him through the poet's eyes.

But to complete the picture we need to look at the poem *Sweeney Among the Nightingales*. Here the bald truth is laid before us. Bereft of his religious faith, modern man has degenerated into a low creature. His original manhood has fallen from him: "He sprawls at the window-sill and gapes." If the gentleman, the sophisticate, would demur, the answer is that the *man* in Sweeney is silent; while the aboriginal, the unregenerate creature in him, speaks and acts in banal and coarse response to the evil influence represented by the woman in the Spanish cape who

Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees
 Slips and pulls the table cloth
 Overturns a coffee-cup,
 Reorganized upon the floor
 She yawns and draws a stocking up.

Here is preoccupation with what is animal in man: in his blood, in his mind, in his will. But the man himself remains unseen. He is hidden in the song of the nightingales. Surfeited with victory, like ancient Agamemnon Sweeney goes to his destruction, heedless of the song

The nightingales are singing near
 The Convent of the Sacred Heart,

a liquid but mocking, warning song, as ancient as the voice of the prophet Jeremiah whose note of lamentation is heard in the litany of the Christian church.

The hidden paradoxical truth is contained in what Eliot says in the first four lines of *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain.

The words that begin the poem suggest Chaucer's opening lines of the *Canterbury Tales*; only in *The Waste Land* they are given a painfully jumbled appearance, designed to symbolize the naturalistic outlook of modern man and the world's consequent disorder. At one glance, we see Eliot's literary technique, his critical method, and his philosophical approach to social problems. The images that move before our eyes as we go farther into the poem at first confuse us. They represent the mass of current ideas and various beliefs which find expression through the use of familiar symbols. But against these the poet sets his Christian faith in the form of a positive attitude that serves the dialectical purpose of discriminating truth from error, of establishing a pattern for belief and conduct, and of laying the foundation for a hopeful outlook on life. Thus

Eliot illustrates his idea of the use of poetry in his search for a hierarchy of values and for a way out of world chaos.

But now to return to the poem's message: the order of nature is what we see it to be—rain after sunshine, leaf after seed, and, after a little, the burial of the dead. But man is in perennial discontent with this order. He joins with nature, yet demurs. He goes south in winter, yet dreams of the distant north, of its birth pangs, its coming to life in the new spring. Man protests against the eternal cycle. He searches for a beginning and an end. He rebels against repetition, and looks for some consummation, some fulfilment of his hope. In short, man looks for a city that is real; not the unreal city symbolized in the cold muddy fog that bogs down the soul, of which Eliot writes in *The Waste Land*:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

It is not the being dead and buried that they feel. The letting go of life, at last, is easy in the frost's numbing grip. It is the pain of the resurrection that keeps so many dead so long. The pangs of birth, and afterward the death in life, torment them. Putting the thought more plainly, it is easier to follow natural reason than the divine spirit. In nature the leaf falls easily from the tree, the worm creeps easily into the soft ground. The natural man shrinks from the stirring of his soul. He would have no spark of God disturb his clod; he would rather vegetate, be kept comfortable and dormant under the winter's obliterating snow, and feed his own thoughts on his life's dry root.

II.

In a note on *The Waste Land* Eliot acknowledges his debt to two books: Miss Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*; and Frazer's famous eleven-volume *The Golden Bough*. The former centers in the Grail legend; the latter has its beginning in a

treatise on Diana Nemorensis, goddess of fertility. The theme of the poem is that of purification through death and birth; its central ideas are man's impotency, his helplessness, and his quest for salvation. Hardly any treatment of the theme could be more true to the facts of human nature; none could imply more clearly the reality of the supernatural. By joining the primitive with the eschatological, the "first" and the "last" in man's generative and regenerative history, Eliot achieves the unusual dual result of making the whole of history contemporary with modern man, and of picturing man in a state of inertia, of spiritual torpor, vegetatively alive and dying, and though dying yet ready to be born.

As with man, so it is with the modern world. It is a desert world, dying of thirst; yet thirsting to live, waiting and expectant. Who, the poet asks, shall deliver it from this doom of fire and ashes? The winds now blow only to spread handfuls of man's dust. The nightingale sings as it has sung through the long ages since Sophocles' day; its song fills the desert with its "inviolable voice," the voice of sweetness, of sorrow, dripping like sweet water from a fountain. But the nightingale's warning note falls on "dirty ears." Man's history is reduced, Eliot says, to a counting and listing of "withered stumps of time"; and his impotent answer to the sin and shame of the world is only this: "My nerves are bad tonight." It is life's banality in mocking contrast to its bountiful offer of beauty that the poet tries to make us see.

But the story is not all despair. Assured of man's death within himself, his "death by water," by a current under the sea that has "picked his bones in whispers," the poet looks to a resurrection. He dares to prophesy by the life that is in man; and he listens to what the thunder says. What does the thunder say to thirsty men whose lips bleed in the dry wind? Nothing, at first, for it is a "dry sterile thunder without rain." If only there were a pool of water in the land, or the sound of a little water running over a rock,

Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water

This is Eliot's way of depicting a world half dead, kept alive only by a tormenting thirst. Who of us, looking intently at the spectacle of a world in which men madly inflict torment only to reap torment, does not feel his own flesh creep with revulsion at all this useless waste of blood—himself tormented to a prophecy of doom, till he asks, with the poet :

What is that sound high in the air
 Murmur of maternal lamentation
 Who are those hooded hordes swarming
 Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
 Ringed by the flat horizon only
 What is the city over the mountains
 Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
 Falling towers
 Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
 Vienna London
 Unreal

Is there any note of hope? None but of hope in God. His lightning is the judgment that holds the hope of our peace; His voice is the thunder that will bring the rain. Would that men might see His lightning while they stand, staring; that they might hear His thunder while they wonder, despairing! But the poet sees, and hears. He hears the wind singing in the grass. The black clouds gather. Then suddenly, in a voice majestic as the Ancient of Days, and in an old Oriental tongue, the thunder speaks. Eliot finds the words with which to close *The Waste Land* in the ancient *Upanishads*. They are onomatopoeic and meaningful :

Datta, dayadhvam, damyata :—

“Give, sympathize, control”—

Shantih shantih shantih :—

“The Peace which passeth understanding.”

Then, as if this fierce probing of the poet were not deep enough, Eliot writes *The Hollow Men*. In a few short stanzas he descends quite abruptly to the bottom of the prosaic hell of the year 1925. To those who lived then and thought of the age in which they lived, the poem's subtitle, “Mistah Kurtz—he dead,” is adequately hard and clear. It is difficult to forget

that degenerative decade in American history: its reaction to a world war, its thirst for sensation, its childish and desperate hunger to live "now or never"; and then the aftermath of a moral debacle and an economic depression.

But Eliot looks beyond the lurid moment to the cause behind the scene. From a height above the level of earthly things the poet sees deep into the abyss of man's nature: his feverish striving, his inane human hopes, his empty pose of success, his hollow, frustrate life. Eliot is here the critical, searching poet who, knowing the modern man for what he is, lays bare the dry center of decay that is so often his living grave. He sees that, without a faith solidly based on a sound conception of God,

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar
Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion.

Eliot is a hard critic who refuses to offer a cure for the disease before he has diagnosed it. In his diagnosis he finds that a malignant materialism has fastened itself on us and done its destructive work. Our original Christian faith, the living breath that for centuries sustained an entire civilization, is gone from us. Investing his criticism with a poet's insight, Eliot pictures us living in our age as dead men—no longer alive in actuality, but empty, hollow, stuffed and swinging in the wind, awaiting death, yet not finding "death's dream kingdom." He sees us living in a dead, a cactus land, erecting stone images, seeking vain things; now trying to answer the supplicating dead, now "trembling with tenderness," with quivering lips trying to form a prayer, to keep at bay the specter of skull and bones in a land where there are no eyes,

In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

Eliot asks: How can we endure, being so empty, so inane of hope? Is there nothing to fall "between the idea and the reality, Between the motion and the act" but the black shadow of our human impotency? There is nothing, the poet answers, but the prayer uttered by us on our little inch of ground, but heard through the deep past ages: "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen." Our helplessness is our condemnation, and our hope. It is when our souls are empty and our self-trust is zero that by heavenly grace our spiritual regeneration may begin.

There is no staying in such a valley of dying stars, says Eliot; not for the man who would retain his sanity and save his own soul. He must escape or die. Reform must come, reconstruction must begin—but not until the odor of death is gone, and only with the coming of the sunshine of the reborn year. History, like nature, must await the second spring. Meanwhile, the poet tells us, the winds of judgment blow across the wasted earth; the soul cries out to the sweet Virgin and her Son in the penitence of *Ash-Wednesday*, cries out for deliverance and forgiveness in the historic words of the Church:

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.

After the storm of judgment has blown over the graves we have made in the earth, the night will be still. Then, in the cool stillness we may hear with Ezekiel the questioning heart of man, saying: "Can these bones live?" We ask: Is there any hope of a new, a restored world? If we look to the flesh of man for the answer we shall wait in vain, we shall wait until the leopards, the beasts of earth, eat our hearts and that which is contained in the "hollow round of the skull." It were better to ask the wind, for the wind will listen; the winnowing wind of judgment will listen above the noise of the fury of evil men.

But the stair of purgation is steep, Eliot tells us in *Ash-*

Wednesday. The ascent is by three stages: first, a prayer for mercy in the hour of death; second, an agonizing struggle, and a bewildered turning between hope and despair; third, a complete and contrite resignation to the will of God. Through heavenly grace the third stair is reached at last as, climbing up the slow ascent of his purgatory, the modern man, his strength almost gone, breathes the prayer:

Lord, I am not worthy
 Lord, I am not worthy
 but speak the word only.

So rescued, as from a blight in the month of May, and walking in the fresh morning "between the violet and the violet," restored and kept on earth by grace, and viewing the earthly years that lie before him "through a bright cloud of tears," he hears the mellow voice of the years saying:

Redeem
 The time. Redeem
 The unread vision in the higher dream
 While jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse.

He hears the voice in every wind, "Redeem the time!" The upspringing fountain says it; the bird in the deep green foliage of the yew tree sings it; and the wind shakes it in a "thousand whispers from the yew": "Redeem the time!"

Have we not all heard it, this pleading ultimate word, driven in upon us, stronger than the beat of war drums, sharper than the shot of war guns? It is flung at us by the cry of the news-boy at each sunrise; it echoes around us from the voice of the radio at each sunset: "Redeem the time!" The prophet John heard it in the voice of the axe against the tree, of the winnowing wind beating out the chaff on the threshing floor. The poet Eliot hears it in the accent of the Fourth Gospel, in the doctrine of the Incarnation, in the "Word within the world and for the world," in the Word made flesh. Christ is come to redeem the time, to quicken the earth, to take away in us the "tension between dying and birth," and to open our eyes to

see *life* take form "between the ivory gates." For us, too, the voices "shaken from the yew tree drift away"; our sorrow ceases and our questioning ends; and we find our peace. And we say, with Eliot, who says it with Dante:

Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace is in His will.

III

It is an interesting route on which Eliot takes us as we follow him through his volume of *Collected Poems*. We take our first step from the fastidious but frustrated Prufrock to Gerontion who is an old man with a dull head and a dry brain, but who—though his vision is distorted—sees Christ come into a depraved world, into a "depraved May" when the dogwood is in blossom and the lambs are playing in the meadow, and we should expect among them a lamblike Christ. But Christ comes, instead, as a tiger with beauty and with terror. The world is decadent and ready for judgment. In the prophet John's words, the "fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

After this introduction, we are taken to the larger scene, to the waste land men have made of the earth. It is a desolate scene, beginning with the burial of the dead. The world's light has gone out, and the nightingale's song falls in judgment on deaf ears. Is it possible, we ask, for men in a world so beautiful to sink so low and to carry the world to ruin with them? We see ancient Carthage burning—and modern London and Berlin. We hear the gulls' cry of judgment above the deep sea moving in upon the earth to cover up the deeds of evil men: and we say, "O Lord, thou knowest, thou art just." The dry thunder crackles from rock to rock, as the poem *The Waste Land* nears its close, and the world's cry of sorrow, its suppressed agony, reaches our ears in a "murmur of maternal lamentation."

But it is not the end of the world. It is the earth's waiting for the rain. The earth is a crouched jungle, "humped in

silence." At last it rains. The thunder's voice is clearly audible; its words melt into the pleading reverberation: "Give, sympathize, control." The poem ends with the three times repeated word, meaning, "Heaven grant us the peace which passeth understanding." There has been an interval in which the world has seemed to be a place inhabited by hollow men, men stuffed with straw standing upright as if alive, but dead amid strewn stones and the gray cactus on the sand. But the word of God is not dead. Through the hollow world rings the sound of the ageless prayer: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen."

In *Ash-Wednesday* we witness the soul's purgation. Dante's *Inferno* is left behind. Hope is born. Gradually the soul climbs the steep stairs toward the ivory gate. The poem closes on a high plane with the penitent prayer:

Suffer me not to be separated
And let my cry come unto Thee.

We see the poet's religious intent even more clearly when we come to the poems *Journey of the Magi* and *A Song for Simeon*. Here, for the first time, the legend is expressly Christian, and we see that the poetry is theological. There is less intricacy of image, less literary subtlety, involved mythology, and weight of classical learning in these poems—and intentionally so. It is as if all the hard sophistication, depicted for instance in the *Portrait of a Lady*, were burned or brushed away before the clean picture of the advent of Christ. To be sure, the leader of the Magi counts again the cost in retrospect, as one who, rich in the wisdom of this world, has bargained for the greater divine wisdom, and won; not indeed earthly riches, or a securer crown, but a bitter dissatisfaction with the "old dispensation"; and who would go westward following that star again to find another death of worldly loss in the hard but wonderful birth in Bethlehem. And Simeon of Gospel fame, watching the winter sun creep up the hills, with life in old age lying lightly on him like a feather on a man's hand or dust in the sunlight, talks to himself, half praying as he talks, thinking

of his children's children and of their house that will some day be desolate, and says :

Grant us thy peace. . . .
Now at this birth season of decease,
Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word,
Grant Israel's consolation
To one who has eighty years and no to-morrow.

We should not presume that the poems of Eliot were written or arranged in any such precise order to represent the soul's ascent to faith. There are poems which break the continuity or are only remotely relevant to the theme. But the main trend is apparent; and it is in accord with Eliot's dominant theological interest, his strong turn toward orthodoxy, and—what is at this moment significant to us—his insistence that both literature and society must, in all eventualities, submit to the Christian order. It is, Eliot believes, only in a Christian world order that culture can serve a good end. The problem of civilization is not one of politics only, but of a right religious attitude, of faith in a divine providence and in a Christian conception of human society and of world history. And Eliot wishes Christian history to be understood as the *divine history* within human history. It is the meaning to be found in the mass of facts and the succession of events. Here, definitely, Eliot would remind us, is a pattern of reference for constructive thinking, and a builder's blueprint for the task of social reconstruction.

It is at this point, also, that Eliot brings literature to bear on religion, and helps us to look on Christian truth through poetry. Theology, Eliot thinks, bears as certain a relation to literature as literature bears to life. It is only against a rational Christian background that a work of literature may present us with an adequate criticism of life. The study of theology therefore underlies all other studies: its suppositions are presupposed in all other suppositions; it stands first in the orders of both logic and history. All other thinking, compared to it, begins *in medias res*, in the midst of things. Literature, like

every created thing, acknowledges its debt to first principles. The grass, we say, sings the praise of the stream, and the stream sings the praise of the sun. Great writing is the word invested with a greater meaning than its own. It is the living word incarnate, defying corruption. The poet Shelley gives a Platonist's approval to this truth when he says that "poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man."

We are reminded by Eliot not to infer that we are to be saved—as Matthew Arnold once thought—by the gospel of poetry, but rather, if rightly understood, by the poetry of the Gospel—by which is meant the incarnate Word within the written word. And this Word, we are to note, is being continually rewritten through history in hieroglyphs that record the great tradition of our Christian faith; it is there for us to read, the History within history, preserved in the living institution of the church.

Of this History, its greater part written in martyrdom on the monuments of modern civilized society, we have the record. It began modestly in Palestine; touched the Aegean shores; reached Rome where it outlived the classical empire's fall; then settled in Europe, undergoing hardship, faced by a corrupting paganism, and exposed to the barbarian peoples whom it gradually converted. It established a medieval empire, produced a great liturgy, built monasteries, churches, and universities, and formulated a scholastic philosophy. Forced to face new issues with the Protestant Reformation, it built the Puritan state (in England helping to establish a constitutional monarchy); aided in promoting an indigenous culture which was to withstand Deism; and entered the nineteenth century strong enough to meet the vast problems of the new evolutionary science, and the industrialization of the modern world. And this Christian tradition remains in our time the one mighty obstructive stone in the pathway of tyrants who dash themselves against it with no greater effect than to verify, now as in every age, the words of the church's Founder, who declared that "the stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes."

IV

It is not by a mere coincidence that Eliot speaks of this stone in two of his later poems entitled *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Rock*. Both poems center in the Christian church; and there is nothing soft in the sound of the word *Church* for Eliot. It signifies a strong, realistic, and firm institution. Compared to it, earthly things are as hollow shells—such perishable things as bank accounts, bodily comforts, worldly pleasures, wealth, and fame. The church, we are reminded, is the cleanly vigorous, the severely disciplined and disciplining spiritual body of Christ, divinely conscious of itself, and possessing a profound knowledge of the world, its sin, its hunger for forgiveness, and its thirst for peace.

In a poem dealing with the martyrdom of Thomas Becket in the historic struggle between the archbishop and the English king, Eliot, speaking through one of the priests, says:

We can lean on a rock, we can feel a firm foothold
Against the perpetual wash of tides of balance of forces of
 barons and landholders;
The rock of God is beneath our feet,—

In these words the poet seeks to help us set our steps on solid ground, there confidently to await our time, while around us secular social philosophies crumble slowly into dust. And when, further in the story, fiendish jealousy and hate have spent themselves, when the sin is committed, the murder accomplished, and evil lies spread out foul and loathsome in the presence of God, we can hear and understand the poet's outcry in behalf of our age, in the direful chant,

Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind! take stone from
 stone and wash them.
The land is foul, the water is foul, our beasts and ourselves
 defiled with blood.

Yet, with Eliot, we restrain our thoughts from violence, we contain ourselves in peace, as we hear above the mad uproar a voice like St. Stephen's. It is the dying Becket, saying:

"Now to Almighty God . . . I commend my cause and that of the Church."

But Eliot is a logical and objective poet. Noble suffering, he realizes, may be purifying; but it is great only as its end is great. A death may be cruel, yet cure nothing. Truth is not created, but established through martyrdom. In the order of divine events, the gospel was first; the apostleship followed. Pentecost antedates the stoning of St. Stephen. His blood was the first harvest of seed to be gathered from the parent tree and to be sown to the end of the earth. To make us aware of this fact, to startle us into seeing it plainly, Eliot says in *The Rock*:

If blood of Martyrs is to flow on the steps
We must first build the steps;
And if the Temple is to be cast down
We must first build the Temple.

In *The Rock* the Christian church is fitly glorified. Man is the seeker; the world is in darkness; heaven, except for the chorus of the stars, is silent. There is no timed theophany; there are only men at work, carrying stones, mingling voices, building a church. The poet is talking almost casually, as he says:

. . . I was told: we have too many churches,
And too few chop-houses. . . .
In the City, we need no bells:
Let them waken the suburbs. . . .
In the pleasant countryside, there it seemed
That the country now is only fit for picnics.
And the Church does not seem to be wanted
In country or in suburb; and in the town
Only for important weddings.

Then the Rock, symbolizing the church, and called by the poet "the God-shaken, in whom is the truth inborn," speaks the word of warning:

I say to you: *Make perfect your will.*
I say: take no thought of the harvest,
But only of proper sowing.

The poet, as he proceeds, continues to let us hear the voices of the builders, men chanting the good song of labor. The church is built, though some workmen stand by unhired. Time passes. The work long ago done by the fathers still stands. They knew how to build, these saints of God's household; they found the chief cornerstone and built thereon; they established the church solidly on Christ. But ruin, in these latter days, has come upon the world. The man of God today walks through desolation, moaning to himself, with shaking head. He moans and says: "We have not built well because we have forgotten the Cornerstone."

What Christ is to the church, the church is to the world. The church is the world's cornerstone. Today builders of the state, masters of a planned economy, hurry to and fro amid this chaos, this rubble which is the aftermath of war, looking for, trying to find, a new cornerstone. They pick up the stone of Communism, but they find hewn in it the words: "There is no Christian God." They uncover the blood-immersed stone of Fascism, and they read: "There is no God but the State." How can a state be built upon itself, or upon this moving mass of sand? It needs, as Eliot says, the Rock on which to stand. Once, indeed, the state was built about the church. That was in the Middle Age. It was not a perfect society, but it was a united one. The modern world has destroyed this unity.

Man cannot live by himself alone. He is by creation a member of the human family of which God is the Father. But man cannot be bound to his brother by any machine. Though our railroads may encircle the globe, and our airliners span the seas in a night, these cannot make men love one another. They cannot unite men in the faith that will build the kingdom of God. Men, to be brothers, must work together at honest labor, for a Christian cause. Eliot, in the poem, calls it building the House of God. Each man has his work to do; yet all work together at a common task. And the end is that men are at peace, a Christian community is established, and life is lived in praise of God. It is of this that Eliot is thinking when he says:

What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of God . . .

A colony of cavies or a horde of active marmots
Build better than they that build without the Lord . . .

Do you huddle close together because you love each other? . . .

If humility and purity be not in the heart, they are not in the
home: and if they are not in the home, they are not in
in the City.

The world, Eliot reminds us again, must be pierced through by the divine sword, as the spirit pierces the flesh; else, in this world of torpor and lost motion, all hope will die. History, as we are to see it, is the book of the acts of this divinely piercing sword; it is the fulfilment, generation after generation, of what, in *The Song for Simeon*, the aged saint foresaw, when he said to Mary: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many . . . Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also." So also, until the whole world is rent by this divine spirit, it will remain an inert formless mass, without hope, without meaning; and recurrent cause and effect will be acted out perpetually in the dull cycle that spells oblivion. But in the Christian kingdom that pierces the temporal order the dull cycle is broken; it is reversed, and death is the prelude to life: anticipative, rich, and meaningful.

But Eliot, we note, is directly interested in the earthly scene. He sees the church situated on earth. He knows the soft soil into which the Rock is laid, and is aware that our will is as water, our resolutions are as sand. Yet, despite this fact, because it is of God's own building, the church stands sure. It is our faith's solid structure; and from it, as from a lighthouse, truth penetrates a dark world. This spoken truth is not the hollow echo of a pious utterance, an empty sound like the voice of the wind in an abandoned house. It is the truth of the Word yet unspoken, by which, if it is spoken, the world lives, but which, if withheld, leaves the earth a waste place, doomed to

desolation. For the nations of the world cannot refuse to hear this Word, and live. Christendom is itself to be judged by it; and by it, as by a sword, Christendom in turn will judge the world. Thinking of what the poet has said, one is upheld—and almost frightened—as one turns to the Gospel record to read:

And whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken:
but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.

Above today's noise of crumbled empires, Eliot lets us hear the voice of prophecy: "Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build thereon." The noise of secular political revolution will not drown this voice. It rises above every controversy. Only a state based on the Christian way of life will stand. This has been the conviction of sagacious statesmen in every age. Christopher Dawson tells us that Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century "advocated a commonwealth of Christian nations based on a common way of life, a community of culture, and possessing a common public law." The suggestion is not idealistic. It is the opposite of any merely theoretical utopia; it is, in fact, so soundly practical and obviously costly as to be shunned.

The Christian life is logical and practical and hard to live. For who cannot see that it is a hard thing for a man who is naturally pleased with his own stature to have the sustenance of his earthly pride taken from him, until, all insignificant in himself and famished, he passes at last through the needle's eye and into the kingdom of God? Humanly speaking, it is not possible for a man to do this thing. But if by divine grace a hundred men do it, we have a Christian church. Every church we see is a sign of this miracle of the needle's eye. It is the sign of the strait gate that leads to peace and enduring life. No nation, as such, can pass through this strait gate. Nations and states are secular institutions. But men pass through this gate to form Christian communities. These communities form the nucleus of a Christian society. From this society rises a culture which, in time, ripens into a tradition and gives a

generic pattern—within the limited boundaries of the varying political states—to the vast social domain we know as a civilization.

It is toward this Christian goal and this new world domain that the poet Eliot was looking when he said: "The only hopeful course, for a society which would thrive and continue its creative activity in the arts of civilization, is to become Christian."

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